American Girl®

Lea 3-Book Collection

girl of the year™

SCHOLASTIC

Cover

Lea Dives In

Lea Leads the Way

Lea and Camila

About the Authors

Glossary of Portuguese Words

Preview of *Gabriela*

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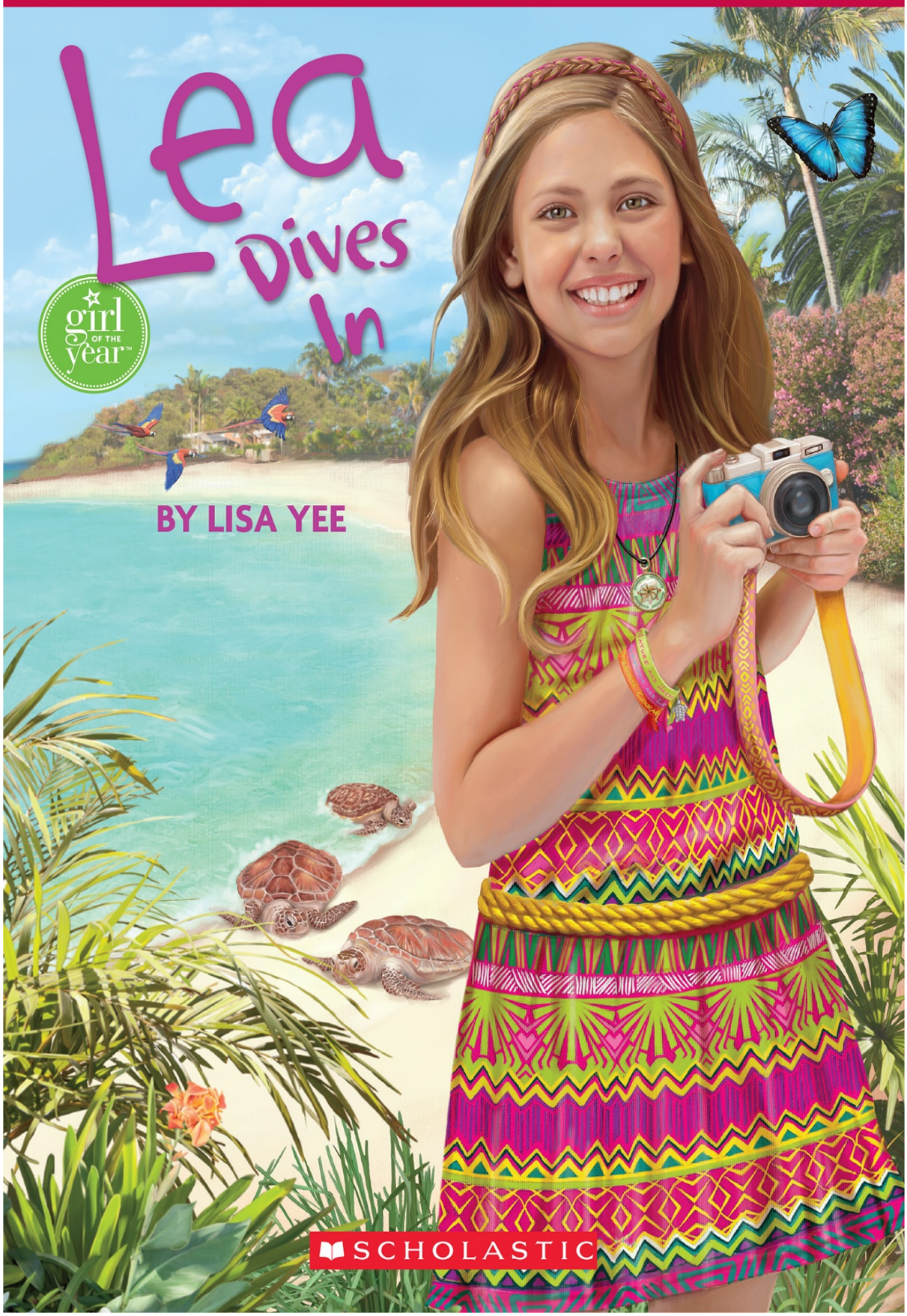
Lea Dives In

girl of the year™

BY LISA YEE



SCHOLASTIC

Lea Dives In

by Lisa Yee

American Girl®

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Jodi, Dan, and Sara

Cover

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The Adventure Begins

Chapter 1

"Lea, don't forget your camera," Dad yelled from the hallway.

My camera! I sure didn't want to leave that behind. I couldn't wait to start taking pictures of my first big adventure outside of St. Louis. I realized that I was a little nervous—I had never even been outside of Missouri before, yet in twenty-four hours I would be 4,500 miles away in Brazil—and I didn't know a word of Portuguese! But with a camera in my hands, I felt like I could go anywhere without looking out of place.

Ever since I got my brother's hand-me-down camera when I was six, I've loved taking photos. And when my grandmother gave me a new camera for my tenth birthday, I took it with me everywhere I went. Last year I won third place in a national kids' magazine contest for my photo collage of St. Louis. I couldn't wait to start taking photos in Brazil! Would I capture the shot that would win me first place?

I've decided to be a photographer when I grow up. Well, that or a veterinarian, or maybe a travel writer, or a paramedic, or…something else entirely. My grandmother always said, "Lea, you should be open to trying new things. Life is like a buffet to be sampled!"

I picked up my camera and stared at my overstuffed suitcase. I had no clue how I was going to pack everything I wanted to. After all, I needed room for the necessities, such as my sea turtle identification book, my passport with its butterfly cover, a photo of my turtle Ginger, and of course my new bathing suit. I felt a rush of excitement as I imagined the sun warming my face and

shoulders on the Brazilian beach. It was freezing in late January in St. Louis, Missouri, and outside my window in Lafayette Square I could see the clapboard houses dusted with snow. But we were heading south of the equator, where it was summer!

"Ahem!" Dad shook me out of my daydream. "How do I look?"

He was standing in the doorway wearing clunky hiking boots, pants with too many pockets, a complicated fishing vest, and a green cloth hat with long flaps on three sides that covered his short, dark brown hair. Everything still had the price tags on. I cringed when I imagined Dad walking around Brazil wearing this ridiculous outfit. Was he really going to wear all that—at once?

"What?" my father asked when he saw the horror on my face. "If we're tromping through the Amazon rainforest, I want to be prepared." He tried to yank one of the price tags off. "Don't you think Zac will be impressed?"

"You can't…" I stopped when I saw him laughing, and then feigned seriousness and said, "Yes, Dad, Zac's going to be totally impressed."

Thinking about Zac made me smile. I hadn't seen my big brother in ages, and he was the reason we were going to Brazil.

Zac and I spent a lot of time together when I was little, especially when Mom and Dad had to work late, which was quite often. I used to follow him like a shadow and we'd talk nonstop—me asking him questions, him giving me the answers. Zac even nicknamed me "Cricket" because he said I was always "chirping up."

But after Zac left for college in California three years ago, the house grew quiet—and so did I. I missed him so much that sometimes I'd hang out in his bedroom and pretend that he was just in another room. Then when Zac headed to Brazil for a year to study the rainforests, that meant not even seeing him at Christmas.

My father stepped over my clothes strewn across the floor and gave me a hug. "It's going to be great with all of us being together again," he said, adding, "I miss him, too."

After Dad left, I sat on my bed and stared at my suitcase. The dark brown leather was battered and looked as if it was held together with stickers from all over the world. It had belonged to Ama, my grandmother.

Ama was my hero. She smelled like orange blossoms, and could roar like a lion, and was the bravest person I had ever known. Who else had a grandmother who climbed mountains, and boogie-boarded in the ocean, and made friends in every country she visited?

The last time I saw Ama, she was in the hospital. Though she struggled to sit up in bed, her familiar smile came easily. The sun was setting, and the room was bathed in a golden glow. She motioned me to her and slowly

unclasped the small compass necklace that she always wore.

“Lean forward, Lea,” she said. When I did, she put it around my neck. “This compass has been my travel companion for years—even before I was a world traveler.” Ama’s voice was weak. I moved closer. “It has pointed me toward all kinds of adventures, and now it can accompany you on yours.”

I lifted the pendant to the light and admired the red flower design on the face of the compass. “Thank you, Ama,” I said.

She nodded, and pulled me in to a tight hug. A nurse came in and said that it was time for Ama to rest. That night, while I was sleeping, my grandmother passed away peacefully.

I picked up the compass from my dresser and fastened the cord around my neck. Would this compass help me in Brazil?

Mom appeared in my doorway. She was carrying some old books with an orange ribbon wrapped around them.

“Join me for a second,” she said, sitting down on my bed.

I sat next to her and peered at the mysterious books as she placed them in my lap.

“Ama wanted you to have these,” my mother said. “She told me to give them to you when the time was right.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“Her travel journals,” Mom explained. “Ama wrote about all of her world adventures in these.”

I looked down at the journals. They were simply numbered One, Two, Three, Four. Each had a worn cover of soft red leather.

“Did you read them?” I asked. I ran my fingertips across the first book’s cover.

My mother nodded. “She led quite a life. Some people don’t like to try new things as they get older. Your grandmother wasn’t like that. In fact, she got *more* adventurous with age.”

“You mean she wasn’t always a world traveler?” I asked.

Mom shook her head. “When I was your age, she always stayed close to home. Ama was busy working, and driving me places, and always volunteering at my school. I never thought of her as someone who would one day climb mountains and go on dinosaur fossil digs. Later, though, it didn’t surprise me. When I think back, I realize she always had that spark.”

“Like Zac,” I said.

“Hmm…yes, I suppose so,” Mom agreed. “And I see that spark in you, too, Lea.”

I felt my cheeks go warm and touched the compass pendant that hung

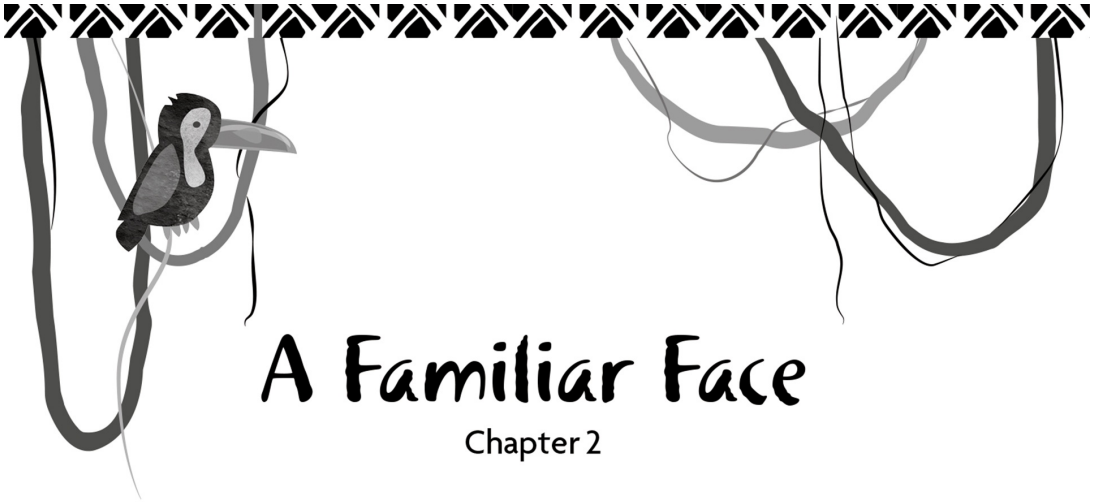
around my neck. Would I ever be a world traveler like my grandmother had been? I had always wanted to be.

Once when I was in kindergarten, I announced, “When I grow up I want to be just like you, Ama!”

“That’s funny,” she said. Her hazel eyes sparkled mischievously. “Because I want to be just like *you*!”

And so you know what Ama did? She put her gray hair into two braids that matched mine! Even though I eventually outgrew that hairstyle, my grandmother never did.

I looked down at her travel journals. The covers were battered, and many of the pages were wavy, as if they had gotten wet and then dried all crinkly. I could hardly wait to read about Ama’s journeys all over the world. As I embarked on my own journey, it would be almost like taking her with me.



A Familiar Face

Chapter 2

As I looked out the airplane window, I could see mountains below. They looked so small that they reminded me of the relief map of Missouri that my best friend Abby and I had once made for school. Mom had told me that I should try to get some sleep since our journey would take over sixteen hours, but I was too excited to sleep. I was going to see Zac!

Zac and I both love animals. Ama was always sending photos of herself doing things like swimming with dolphins, riding a camel, or even holding a huge snake. We lived for her photos and wanted to *be* her! I wondered what wild animals I'd see in the rainforest. A jaguar, maybe? Caimans, of course. Toucans and snakes, I hoped. And monkeys, lots and lots of monkeys! But first, we were going to stay at the beach, which was about fifteen hundred miles away from the Amazon. This would be a first for me—seeing the ocean—and I couldn't wait.

While Mom and Dad slept, I pulled the stack of Ama's journals out of my backpack, untied the ribbon, and opened the first one. It was stuffed with photos and airplane ticket stubs and other scraps of paper, like phone numbers of people she had met. Pasted into the inside cover was a worn black-and-white wedding photo of a young man and woman looking deliriously happy. I looked closely. The bride was Ama! I'd recognize her smile anywhere. The groom was Grandpa Bill. He died long before I was born, but Mom and Ama had told me so many stories about him that I felt as if I knew him.

I turned to the first page of the journal. In Ama's familiar loopy

handwriting it began:

I have decided to stop making excuses and to start traveling like Bill and I always wanted to. I'm a little nervous about traveling alone, but if I don't start now, when will I? Hello world, Amanda Cooper is coming your way!

I turned the page, eager to find out where Ama had traveled to first.

Aloha from Hawaii! she wrote. *Even though I'm in the United States, I feel as if I'm in another country. The island of Kauai is so beautiful—and the beaches, ah, the beaches. I'm definitely not in St. Louis anymore. Today when I was snorkeling, a giant sea turtle swam past me. At first I panicked—he was huge! But then I realized I wasn't that interesting to him, and he just kept going. Neither one of us was in a hurry, and I marveled at the sight of him. I've read that sea turtles bring good luck, so judging by the size of this one, I'll have good fortune for many years to come!*

To think I was once scared of traveling alone and now I can't wait to figure out where I'll go next. Paris? Greece? The Galapagos Islands? Ah, but before I decide, it's time to hit the waves…after all, I won't see anything exciting from the inside of a hotel room! Now that I've gone to the trouble of traveling to a new place, I should see and do everything I can.

Gotta go—time for my windsurfing lesson!

On the next page was a photo of Ama standing next to a windsurfing board on the Hawaiian beach. Her wavy brown hair was streaked with gray and was worn loose, skimming her shoulders. Ama's high cheekbones and freckles reminded me of my mother, and people often said that we shared the same big hazel eyes. But Ama's slightly crooked, totally radiant smile was all her own.

The date in the journal was 1996—twenty years ago. My brother would have been just a few months old.

When Zac announced that he wanted to study the Amazon rainforest, no one was surprised. In college he was an environmental studies major. Like Ama, he craved adventure. Despite my parents' initial objections, for his twentieth birthday, my grandmother took Zac skydiving. I have a photo of the

two of them in the air, grinning.

It was Ama who had convinced my parents to let Zac study in the Amazon rainforest. “My father came to the United States from Brazil when he was a boy,” she began. “That means Zac is one-eighth Brazilian. So it only seems right that we send our young man from the United States back to South America, even if it is just for a year!”

My mother thought it would be dangerous. My father thought it would be expensive. But with Ama on his side, Zac couldn’t lose. She had a way of getting people to do things her way, by making it seem like it was their idea.

“He needs to test himself,” she argued. “He’s ready.”

“Zac can test himself right here in the United States,” Dad said.

“There are wild animals in the rainforest,” Mom pointed out. “And poisonous plants, and—”

“And with any luck he will see them,” Ama noted.

“He could catch malaria,” said Mom.

“He’ll get medicine before he goes,” Ama assured her.

The arguments went back and forth like a doubles tennis match, and in the end, the team of Ama and Zac triumphed.

“Well, it is a wonderful chance to broaden your horizons, Zac,” Dad said. “I wish I had studied abroad when I was in college.”

“And Ama does have a good point about living with a family in the Brazilian rainforest being a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Mom mused. “What an experience that will be!”

And away Zac went, just like that.

No one had asked for my opinion.

It was after midnight when we landed in Salvador, Brazil. Soon we would be meeting Zac at the hotel! I watched the suitcases going around and around the luggage carousel. They were mostly black, including ours—but Mom had tied big red ribbons around the handles so that we could spot them easily. It was a trick she had learned from Ama.

As my parents struggled with the luggage, I glanced around the airport. Near the doors were a few men, each holding a sign with a name on it. These were drivers who were hired to take visitors to their hotels. Chan Family, DiNovas, Dr. Birdsall…*Família Clark.* That was us!

It was hard to see the driver because the sign was covering his face. Plus,

I was sleepy. However, when I heard him yell “Cricket!” I snapped awake. There was only one person in the world who called me that.

“It’s you!” I screamed, running toward him.

“Lea!” Mom called out. “What are you doing?” She paused, then cried out, “Zac!”

“Zac?” Dad said, spinning around. “Zac!”

I was the first to get to him.

“Cricket!” he laughed as I leaped into his arms. He tried to spin me around in the air the way we used to do when I was little—and we both almost fell over.

Mom and Dad joined us for what I am fairly certain was the longest group hug in the history of Brazil.

We hadn’t expected to see Zac at the airport. And he didn’t even look like Zac. His short brown hair was now longish and wavy and had flecks of blond, and his tanned face was covered with stubble. He just barely resembled the pale, skinny goofball I remembered. This new Zac was sort of rugged and more athletic looking. However, his blue eyes still had that sparkle that told me this was my big brother. He mussed up my hair, and I grinned back at him.

“Let me look at you, Cricket,” Zac said, taking a step back. “Hmm, your eyes are still hazel, and your hair is still light brown, but it’s longer than I remembered. Still, I’d recognize that crazy smile anywhere. You’ve grown!”

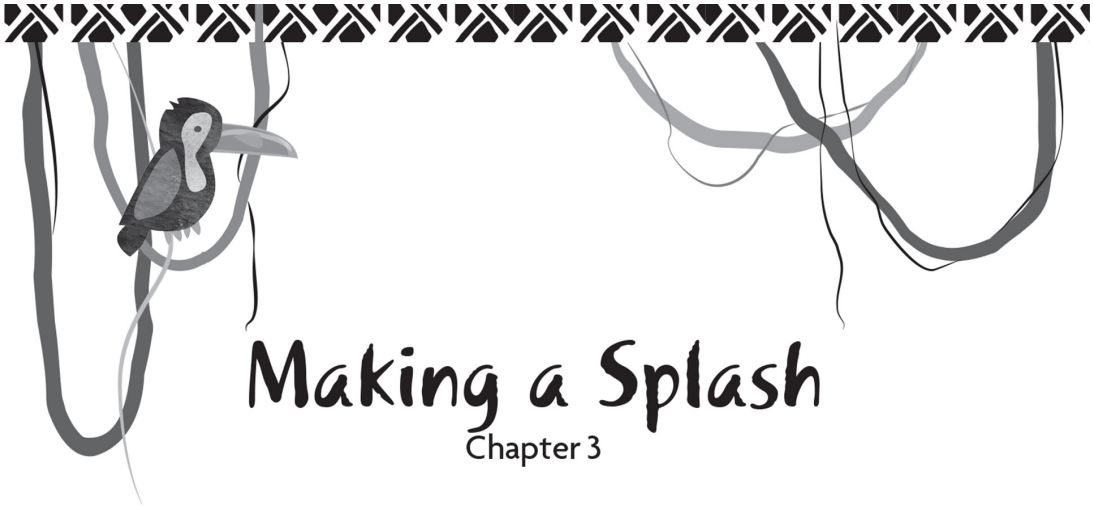
It was true. Recently I’d had a growth spurt, and I was nearly two inches taller than the last time Zac had seen me at the end of the summer. I was now tall enough to hook arms with him as we left the airport.

By the time we finally checked into the hotel, I was exhausted. I could hear the waves, but even with the moon out it was hard to see them. I could barely keep my eyes open. “Can we go to the beach now?” I asked drowsily.

“It’ll still be there in the morning,” Mom assured me.

“But I can’t wait…” I began. “I came all this way, and if I don’t see the ocean, then I’ll…I’ll…”

Before I could even finish my sentence, I was asleep.



Making a Splash

Chapter 3

It was dark when I woke. For a moment I forgot where I was. Startled, I bolted upright and looked around. That's when I remembered. I wasn't in St. Louis, Missouri, anymore. I was in Salvador, Brazil—and the sound I was hearing was the ocean waves!

I jumped out of bed and almost tripped over the luggage before pulling back the curtains. The bright sunlight blinded me at first, but when my eyes adjusted I gasped. A thin strip of golden sand lay between a rocky sea wall and water shimmering in a shade of turquoise blue I never even knew existed.

I knelt and rooted around my suitcase, tossing my homework assignments aside until I found what I was looking for. When I stepped out on the balcony, I immediately began to take photos with the camera Ama had given me.

I had been waiting for this moment for so long. Practically all my friends had been to the ocean. My best friend Abby had been to the beach THREE times—twice in Florida and once in California.

"You're going to love, love, love the beach!" Abby had declared. We were catching the after-Christmas sales at Chloe's Closet, the only store in Lafayette Square that sells bathing suits year-round. "Here, try these on," she said, piling a half dozen swimsuits into my arms. "And come out after you put them on, so I can see each one!"

My family was still asleep when I changed into my Abby-approved bathing suit. I was so excited that I put both legs into one side. When I fell

over, Mom and Zac slept through it, though Dad mumbled, “I already took out the trash.”

As my family continued to doze, I said softly, “Time to wake up.”

No one did.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me? Time to go to the beach,” I said, louder.

Dad rolled over and Mom put her arm across her eyes.

Zac didn’t even move, but then he was always a solid sleeper.

“Let’s go swimming!” I shouted.

When my parents groaned and insisted they needed coffee first, I turned to Zac, who was barely awake. “Please, go with me to the beach,” I begged.

“Just ten more minutes, Cricket,” he mumbled. “Let me sleep ten more minutes.”

“Zac,” Dad said, his eyes still closed, “please take your sister to the beach.”

“Go with Lea,” Mom said, sounding muffled. It was a miracle that we could hear her at all since she was facedown in her pillow. “And be sure not to let her out of your sight, especially in the water.”

My brother had never been a morning person, and this, at least, hadn’t changed. As we crossed the street leading to the beach, he looked like a zombie. “This is my vacation, too, Cricket,” he grumbled. “I wanted to sleep in.”

I waved him off. I was too happy feeling the warm sand under my feet and noticing that the waves lapping the shore looked like the white peaks on the top of a lemon meringue pie.

This was the moment I had dreamed about. I took a step forward and let the waves lap my feet. I stopped and closed my eyes to smell the salty sea air. It was like a perfume, and it wrapped around me like a hug.

My heart swelling with anticipation, I looked out at the ocean and took a big step forward. My pulse was racing. At first I thought it was because I was so excited to see the ocean. But all at once, I realized that I was scared.

A memory flashed in my mind. I must have been only about six years old, but it felt as if it were yesterday. I was sitting on the dock at Mark Twain State Park, dipping my toes in the water, when I leaned down to look at my reflection—and fell face-first into the lake. I flailed around in a panic. The dock was too high above the water for my short arms to reach. I knew how to swim—I had reached level three in swimming lessons—but as I tried to swim toward a ladder a few feet away, my head went under and I accidentally inhaled water through my nose. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t shout for help, I

couldn’t even cry. I had never been so terrified in my life.

I was probably underwater only a few seconds, but it felt like a lifetime. Luckily, Zac had seen me. He jumped in and pulled me to safety, and before long I was in Ama’s comforting arms.

“I was so scared,” I confessed to Ama. She had been eager to take us to the park, and I wondered if I had let her down. “I’m not like you,” I told her sadly. “You’re always so brave.”

My grandmother held me tighter. “Oh, Lea,” she said, “I’m not fearless, but I don’t let my fear stop me from doing the things I really want to do. You’ll swim again,” she assured me.

Ama was right, of course. For the next few summers I continued taking lessons at our local pool. I always tried to avoid putting my head underwater—and I never did try swimming in a lake again. But this was bigger than any lake—this was the Atlantic Ocean. And it had *waves*.

I shuddered at the memory and looked out toward the ocean. Then I remembered what Ama wrote in her journal: *Now that I’ve gone to the trouble of traveling to a new place, I should see and do everything I can.*

Well, I was *seeing* the ocean. That was step one. So far, so good. But if Ama was right, I *should* do more than just look at it. After all, I could do *that* from my hotel room—and Ama’s point was to get out there and *do* stuff.

I took a deep breath. Today was the day I was going to swim in the Atlantic Ocean!

The sand and water tickled my toes as the waves rolled in to the shore. Some were slow, others fast, thinning out by the time they got to me. I took another step. My feet sank until they were covered with soft, wet sand, and it was hard to lift them. Was this what quicksand was like? I took another step and then another until the water was up to my knees. So far, so good…

Zac ran past me, splashing and then diving into the water. When he surfaced, he waded back toward me with a mischievous grin and shouted, “Cricket, watch out, there’s a wave coming at you!”

I looked around, but could see no waves on the horizon. Then, without warning, Zac pushed a big splash of water at me.

“Surf’s up!” he called, laughing.

I opened my mouth to tell him to stop and got a huge mouthful of seawater. I began to choke and spit out the water. It was salty! Duh—*of course*, the ocean would be salty, but I hadn’t really planned on drinking it.

“Zac!” I screamed as he continued to splash me and laugh. “Stop it! It’s not funny—stop it!”

“Chill, Cricket,” he said, looking disappointed. “It’s no big deal, it’s just

water.”

But it wasn’t just water. It was salty, and it was in my nose and my eyes. The more I rubbed my eyes, the more irritated they became.

“That wasn’t very nice,” I told him.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “Don’t tell me you’re upset over a little water?”

Just then I saw my parents coming toward us. “So, Lea, how do you like your first swim in the ocean?” Mom called as she stepped into the water. Her short, sandy brown hair and the spray of freckles marching across her nose made her look years younger than she really was.

I shrugged. I didn’t want anyone to know how upset I was.

“Lea? Is everything okay?” Mom asked. She turned to Zac. He just shrugged.

“I’m fine,” I muttered through gritted teeth. Mom frowned, concerned. I let go of a sigh. “Really, I’m fine,” I assured her. The last thing I wanted to do was ruin everyone’s vacation.

“I’m just going to take a break,” I announced. There was sand in my mouth and it crunched between my teeth when I spoke.

“Hey, Cricket?” Zac called after me.

I ignored him and headed to a beach chair, plopped myself down, and crossed my arms.

From the shore I could see my parents splashing in the water, acting like kids. Dad picked up Mom and whirled her around while she splashed him. He didn’t seem to mind getting water in his face.

My eyes still stung from the salt water, and I squeezed them shut. Then I sensed something blocking my sun. I squinted and saw Zac standing above me.

“What’s up, Cricket?” he asked. “You’re not mad at me, are you? I’m sorry if I got you upset.”

“I’m not upset,” I lied.

“Good!” he said. Smiling, Zac shook his head like a dog and showered me with water coming off his hair. Though he might have thought this was funny, I certainly didn’t. “How do you like the beach?”

I wanted to say, *You try choking on salt water and getting it in your eyes and nose, and see how you like it.*

“It’s amazing,” I said. And it was—amazing to *look* at.

“Isn’t it?” Zac said, shading his eyes. “I wish we could stay longer, but Dad says we need to check out of the hotel soon.”

“Aw, too bad,” I said, secretly relieved.

“Don’t worry,” Zac assured me. “If you like this beach, you’re going to *love* Praia Tropical. It’s one of the most beautiful beaches in Bahia.”

Great. Another beach where I can make a fool of myself.

“And get this,” Zac continued. “There’s a big sea turtle sanctuary nearby.”

I perked up. “Turtles?”

“Hey, that reminds me,” Zac said. “How’s old Ginger?”

“Ginger’s good,” I said, thinking fondly of my own little turtle back home. “Abby’s babysitting her.” I hoped I had left enough dried shrimp for Ginger’s daily treat. “It was so funny—last week Ginger climbed between her two rocks and it looked like she got stuck, but—”

“That’s nice,” Zac said. He was looking at a sailboat on the horizon.

“So, is the Amazon rainforest very far from here?” I asked, changing the subject. Clearly, my Ginger story had bored him. Maybe I could convince my parents to cut down our beach time and go to the rainforest sooner! I was eager to see the wild animals—and not too eager to swallow any more salt water.

Zac turned to me and raised his eyebrows in a way that made me wonder whether I had asked a dumb question. “Well, yeah, the Amazon rainforest is practically on the other side of the country,” he said, as if this was something everyone knew. Well, everyone but me. “Brazil is huge—larger than the United States, not counting Alaska. Right now we’re in Bahia, one of twenty-six states here in Brazil. It’s famous for soccer, and seafood, and…”

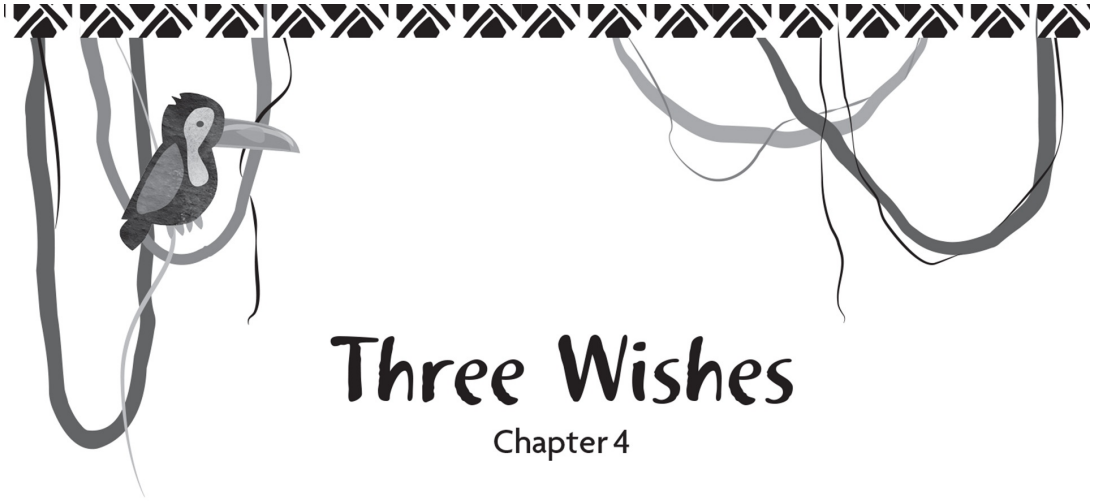
As my brother rambled on, I felt like I was back in school listening to someone’s geography report. My eyes began to glaze over as Zac continued to lecture me. “Okay, okay! I get it,” I interrupted, annoyed. “The Amazon rainforest is far away.”

Zac’s mouth snapped shut and he nodded. “Fine. Just trying to be helpful,” he said curtly. “You asked me a question, remember?”

For an awkward moment we just looked at each other, and neither of us had anything to say.

Something about Zac was different. Every time Ama used to come home from a trip she’d joke that Zac and I had grown so much she hardly recognized us. But this time, it wasn’t just that my brother *looked* different. He *acted* different, too.

And now I realized that I didn’t even know how to talk to him.



Three Wishes

Chapter 4

Before we left for Praia Tropical, Mom and Dad took us to visit Pelourinho, Salvador's historic district. In the more modern area of the city near our hotel, the streets had been paved and the buildings were clean and new. But here in Pelourinho, I felt as if I had stepped out of a time machine. Old stone churches towered up toward the clear blue sky. Inside, some even glistened with gold. Real gilt paint and gold leaf! I took lots of photos to show Abby.

My mother is an architect who restores historic buildings, and as we walked, she pointed out the different kinds of architecture and explained what the buildings were made of. Dad's a history professor at Washington University in St. Louis, so whenever there was a plaque on a building or it was featured in his guidebook, he'd get all excited.

Each of the colonial buildings that lined both sides of the gray stone streets was drenched in bright colors—green, yellow, blue, red, orange—and the way the colored roofs and gables slanted up, one on top of another, reminded me of an open box of crayons. As we maneuvered down the narrow sidewalks, Dad tried to walk and read his guidebook at the same time, and he would have fallen twice had Mom not been there to steer him.

Dad pointed to the page that he was reading and said, "It says here that much of the food, music, and culture around us was influenced by African heritage that goes back centuries."

I trained my camera on a group of dark-skinned women who all wore white, layered dresses with frilly sleeves, white headscarves, and colorful beaded necklaces. They stood behind tables that held several trays of delicious-looking snacks. One woman carried a handful of rainbow-colored ribbons. Was there a festival going on? I was about to ask Dad if it said anything in his guidebook about some sort of event when I heard a rumbling in the distance.

"What's that sound?" I asked Zac.

"Drums. Wherever you are in Salvador, you can hear them," Zac answered. "To the Brazilian people, music is like air. It's just a natural part of life." He playfully drummed on the top of my head.

When I was younger I would have loved this. But I wasn't a little girl anymore. I pushed him away.

Across the town square we came across a church with an iron gate guarding the entrance. You had to look closely to see the gate, because every inch of it was covered with colorful ribbons just like those I had seen the woman in white carrying by the handful. I pulled out my camera and took a photo of the ribbons fluttering in the breeze.

"It's beautiful," Mom said with a gasp.

"Are the ribbons for decoration?" I asked.

"Those are wish ribbons," Zac explained. "*Senhor do Bonfim*, the savior of Bahia, grants the wishes of anyone who ties a ribbon around their wrist or something like a church gate."

Wish ribbons? I loved the idea! "Can I get one?" I asked. "I saw a lady in white holding a ton of them!"

Zac nodded. As he led us across the square, he explained about the ladies wearing white. "They're called *Baianas*, or women of Bahia. You'll see them all over Salvador, selling traditional Afro Brazilian food and, of course, wish bracelets."

The woman in the white dress greeted us with a big smile and asked me which color I would like. Zac explained that each color has a special meaning. Red was for strength and passion, yellow for success, turquoise for love and peace, pink for friendship, and so on. I selected orange for courage.

Dad dug into his wallet and gave the woman a couple of colorful Brazilian dollar bills, which Zac had told me are called *reals*.

I held out my wrist for Zac to help me tie on the ribbon.

He began knotting it. "*Um, dois, três*," he counted in Portuguese. "You're supposed to have a friend tie it on using three knots. Then you make a different wish for each knot. Wearing the ribbon reminds you of your

wishes, and when it falls off your wishes have been granted."

I closed my eyes and thought of a wish that I wanted to come true so badly that I wished it three times:

I wish for the courage to swim in the ocean.

I wish for the courage to swim in the ocean.

I wish for the courage to swim in the ocean.

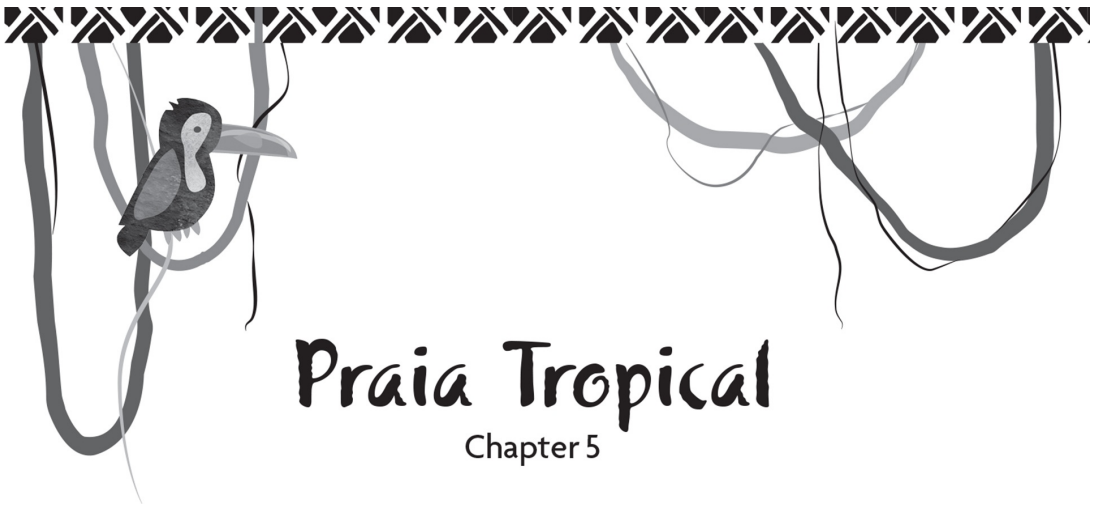
I looked down and admired my bracelet. "What if I just cut it off to get my wish?" I asked.

"That would bring bad luck," Zac said. "The bracelet has to fall off on its own."

"How long will that take?" I asked, examining the ribbon. I really needed it to fall off immediately, because we'd probably visit the beach again when we got to Praia Tropical.

"It could take a while," Zac explained. "A week, a month, maybe several months."

Several months?! We were going to be at the beach all week. There was no way I could wait that long.



Praia Tropical

Chapter 5

The drive from Salvador up the coast was going to take more than three hours, and I was already bored. “So how are you?” I asked Zac as we sped toward Praia Tropical in my parents’ rental car.

“Sleepy,” he said, stretching his arms.

“I was hoping we could talk,” I said as I lowered the window. The warm breeze was soothing. “You know, catch up with each other.”

“Okay, sure, Cricket.” Zac stifled a yawn. “You start.” He slipped his sunglasses on.

There was so much I wanted to tell him—about my teacher Ms. Swain, and my photography, and Ginger, and…Zac fell asleep before I could say one word. I didn’t have much time to feel insulted, though, because I fell asleep shortly after him.

My brother and I woke up at the same time, just as we were pulling into *Resort Castelo de Areia*, which Zac said means “Sand Castle Hotel.” As I gazed at the lush tropical beauty of the beach unfolding before me, I felt as if I had wandered into a dream. The golden sand seemed to stretch for miles, and tall palm trees bowed toward the water. The sea was a deep, translucent shade of turquoise blue and looked as if it were lit from below. A rainbow of worn wooden rowboats rested on the sand with nets and barnacled cages tossed haphazardly onboard, while local fishermen laughed and swapped stories in the shade. I touched my compass necklace. Ama would have loved it here.

“We’d better hurry if we want to get in some beach time before the sun sets,” Mom said as soon as we dropped off our suitcases in our room.

Gulp. We hadn’t even been here for five minutes and already my family was ready to hit the waves. Trying to stall, I slowly opened my suitcase and pretended to dig around for my swimsuit. Then I saw my camera and had an idea. While the thought of swimming in the ocean still made me nervous, *looking* at it was something I was happy to do.

“I’ll race you to the water,” Zac said. “And I promise not to splash you this time.”

“Um, no. I need to take some photos.”

Zac spun around. “Photos? Now?”

“Yeah,” I said. But I could tell he needed a better excuse. “They’re for, um…a homework assignment,” I said weakly.

“Seriously?” Zac snorted. “You’re in Brazil. At the beach. On vacation. Come on, Cricket! Your homework can wait—let’s swim!”

I bristled. Before Zac went off to college, I was happy to do whatever he wanted to do, and I loved any attention he gave me. But now I wished he’d leave me alone.

I noticed that he had a glob of sunscreen on his face where he hadn’t rubbed it all the way in. I didn’t tell him about it.

“Zac,” I said sweetly, “I know it’s summer here and you’re on vacation, but back in St. Louis school is in session. Not only do I have to keep up with my homework, but I have to do an extra-credit assignment about Brazil.” I picked up a math book, along with Ama’s first journal. I was almost halfway through it, and it was giving me some ideas for my extra-credit assignment. I slipped the books into a light backpack, along with my camera, and followed Zac out the back door of our room and onto a path to the beach.

My parents were walking hand in hand way ahead of us, but my mother did her mom thing where you think she can’t hear you, but she can. Teachers have this skill, too.

Mom turned around and gave me a warm smile. “I know we promised Ms. Swain that you’d do all your assignments, but we’re also here to have fun, Lea. There will be plenty of time for homework at night.”

I nodded and clutched my camera. Maybe I could just take a few photos. After all, with the sun hitting the water, it looked as if someone had tossed a million jewels across the surface of the sea. “I’m going to take some pictures first,” I announced. “Abby is going to want to see this!”

My parents shrugged and threw our towels down on some beach chairs before running into the foamy white waves with Zac close behind. Mom and

Zac swam so far out that all I could see were their heads bobbing in the water. Dad stayed closer to shore near me.

Will I ever be brave enough to swim in the ocean? I wondered as I hit the zoom button on my camera to frame a shot of Mom and Zac.

So I got some salt water in my eyes and nose, and sand in my mouth—that's not a big deal, right? Zac once ate dirt when he was little. And that was on purpose.

Maybe I could try it again.

I settled onto a beach chair and opened Ama's journal. Now she was writing about her trip to Norway.

> *The fjords are so beautiful, but the water is arctic! This morning, they served us pickled herring for breakfast, which seemed a bit odd but was actually quite delicious.*
>
> *I'm feeling rather nervous, though. Today our tour bus will take us up into the mountains, which are cold and snowy, even though it's June. They've offered us a chance to go skiing, which I haven't done since I was a child—and the Missouri Ozarks aren't nearly as big as the mountains of Norway! Still, when I'm traveling, I've decided to live by the words of an old and dear friend who once told me, "Test yourself—you'll never regret it."*

I closed the journal and looked out at the sparkling water.

I stood up. If I was going to do this, I knew I'd better hurry before I lost my nerve. I ran down the beach as fast as I could, into the water, past Dad and toward Mom and Zac…and then BOOM! I got hit by a wall of water.

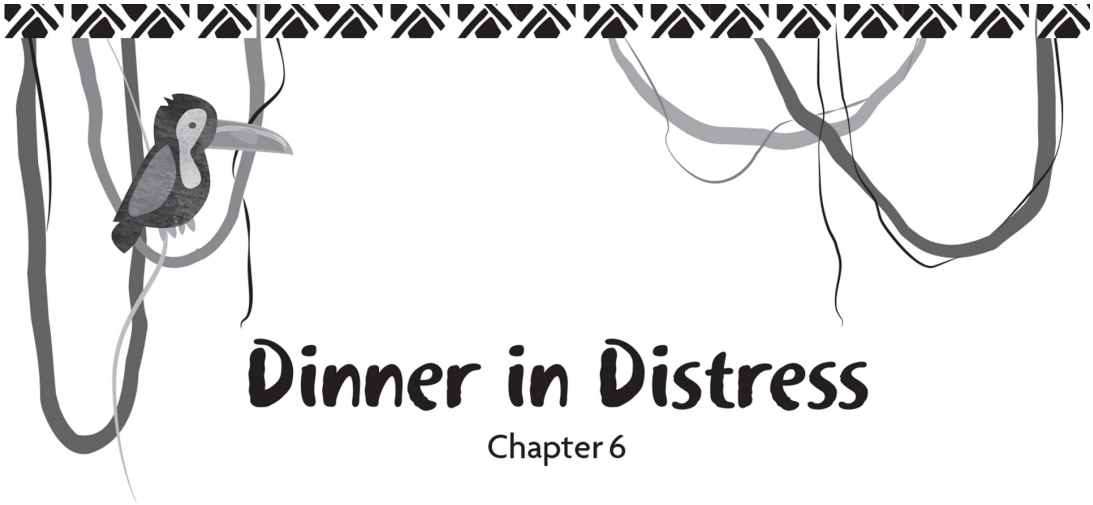
It wasn't really that big, but it was strong enough to knock me over. I went down and rolled under the wave, bumping against the ocean's sandy floor. I swallowed salt water and scraped my knee. It felt like I was under for minutes, when it was probably only seconds—but when I finally came up for air, I had water in my nose and it hurt, like it was going into my brain.

At last I managed to stand, but my legs felt like jelly. I was gasping and shaking. There was sand in my eyes, and it stung. I could make out someone racing toward me.

"Are you all right, Lea?" Dad asked. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight so that the waves couldn't knock us down.

"I'm okay," I sputtered as I leaned into him. "I think I'll just go sit for a while."

I headed back through the soft sand to the safety of our beach chairs. I wrapped my beach towel tightly around myself and turned my back to the water. I was never going near the ocean again.



Dinner in Distress

Chapter 6

Dinner was a welcome distraction to get my mind off being tossed in the ocean like socks in a washing machine. But the menu was written entirely in Portuguese, and I couldn't figure out what was in any of the dishes.

"How do you say 'hamburger' in Portuguese?" I asked my brother.

Mom shook her head. "We didn't come all this way so you could order something you can get at home," she reminded me.

"Brazilian food is great," Zac insisted. "You should try the *moqueca*."

I wrinkled my nose. "The mo—what?"

"Moqueca," Zac repeated. "It's a seafood stew."

Dad made a big show of putting down his menu. "Why don't you order for all of us?" he said, slapping Zac on the back with pride.

"You got it!" Zac said, smiling. He turned to our waitress and placed our order in rapid Portuguese.

"*Obrigado*," Zac exclaimed. The waitress smiled broadly in response.

"What does 'obrigado' mean?" I asked Zac.

"Thank you," he said as he unfolded his napkin and placed it in his lap.

"For what?" I said. Didn't he listen to anything I said anymore?

Zac laughed. "Cricket, obrigado means 'thank you' in Portuguese—but you would say *obrigada*, because you're a girl."

Oh. "I knew that's what you meant," I fibbed. "I was just kidding."

When a huge iron skillet was set in the middle of our table, I was dubious. What were those suspicious-looking lumps—and what exactly had caused the creamy stew to turn orange? Was it *supposed* to be that color? Well, at least the rice looked familiar.

"It looks delicious!" Mom reached for a serving spoon. "I'm starving. Swimming always makes me hungry. What about you, Lea?"

I made a face. The dish looked weird, and I wasn't sure I wanted to try it. But Zac was watching me, so I piled rice on my plate and then dug into the skillet. I could make out plump shrimp and chunks of tomato in the thick broth. Maybe this would be good after all. I mean, Ama had eaten pickled fish for breakfast in Norway and liked it, and when she was in Korea, she ate beef tripe stew, and loved it! I doubted that I would have felt the same way, but since I like shrimp, I decided this was worth a try.

"Mmm!" Mom said, savoring a bite. "There's crab in there, too."

Over his plate, Zac sprinkled pinches of spices from the trio of small ceramic bowls on the table, ending with a spoonful of clear green sauce swimming with chopped onions.

I reached for the green sauce.

"You might want to go easy there," Zac warned.

I poured the onions and spices over my meal. "I'm just doing what you're doing," I pointed out.

"Yes, but I've been here for months so I'm used to spicy food. It might be too much for you, Cricket."

Urgg. What was his problem? Did he really think I couldn't handle a few spices? Looking straight at him, I slowly put a huge forkful of moqueca into my mouth.

As I began to chew, it was slightly spicy, but nothing I couldn't handle. I smiled at Zac, who was watching me. But before I knew it, there was a fire in my mouth that made my eyes water. Soon I was sweating, my nose was running, and I thought my head was going to explode.

"Water! Water," I cried out as I fanned my mouth.

Mom handed me my glass of water, then hers, then Dad's and Zac's.

"água de coco, por favor!" Zac shouted to the waitress. Moments later she appeared with coconut water. "Drink this," he ordered. "It will work better than regular water."

There was no time to argue as I gulped down the cold drink. As my mouth began to cool, I was able to breathe.

"Maybe now you'll listen to your big brother," Zac said as he signaled to the waitress to bring me a clean plate.

In that moment, I hated him.

I took another sip of coconut water to cool my palate—and my temper. As Dad discreetly scraped some of the spices off his food, I saw a girl about my age with glossy, dark hair sitting with her mother. She was watching our table, probably because of the scene I had just made. But instead of turning her nose up at me, she smiled warmly and waved. I gave her a shy wave back.

My attention returned to our table mid-conversation when I heard Mom say my name. “Is that all right with you, Zac?” she continued.

“Are you serious?” Zac looked shocked, like he had been asked to grow a horn on his head or something. “I thought my babysitting days were over.”

I must have missed something. “What are you talking about?” I asked, looking back and forth from Mom to Zac.

“They want me to spend the morning looking after you tomorrow while *they* go sea kayaking,” Zac said. “Can you believe it?”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. “You really know how to make me feel good.” I turned to Mom. “Why can’t we come kayaking with you?”

“You have to be over twelve to go sea kayaking,” Mom said gently. “And I thought the two of you would like to spend time together, too. It’s just for a few hours.”

“What are your rates these days?” Dad asked Zac. “I’m sure they’ve gone up from when you were in high school.”

Wait! What? “Your rates?” I asked Zac. “You were *paid* to hang out with me?”

“Not always,” my brother said nonchalantly. “But sometimes.”

“And all this time I thought you had *wanted* to spend time with me,” I said. I could feel my cheeks turn red, and it wasn’t from the spicy food. “Now I find out that Mom and Dad had to *pay* you to be around me?”

“Chill, Lea,” Zac said. “Mom and Dad paid for things like my cell phone, and in exchange I’d babysit you, run errands for them, stuff like that. It’s no big deal.”

But it *was* a big deal to *me*. I felt as if my whole relationship with my brother had been turned upside down.

“Don’t take it personally,” he whispered, messing up my hair. “Cricket, I always had a great time with you. You were such a silly little kid, always making me laugh.”

How could I not take it personally? Was I *still* just a “silly little kid” to him? And now my brother was being forced to be my babysitter once again. I wasn’t sure who was more annoyed, him or me.

I was still fuming when Dad changed the subject. He pulled out his

guidebook and spread a stack of brochures on the table.

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow afternoon?" he asked as he sorted through them.

"Part of me wants to try surfing," Mom said, sounding unsure. "And the other part says I'm too old for things like that."

"Ama was jumping out of airplanes when she was seventy-five," Zac reminded her. "She wasn't too old for anything. Isn't that right, Cricket?"

I shrugged. He was right about Ama, but I didn't feel like agreeing with him about *anything* right then.

"I want to learn how to sleep on the beach," Dad joked.

Zac nudged me. "What about the turtle sanctuary? You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I could tell he was trying to get on my good side.

When Zac lived at home, one of our favorite things to do together was to go to the St. Louis Zoo. As we looked at all the animals, we'd try to act like them. I loved it when we'd clasp our hands together and let our arms swing, like an elephant's trunk. Zac especially liked pretending to be chimpanzees picking the bugs out of each other's hair. I always wanted to bring an animal home with me, but Zac would remind me that we couldn't have pets because Dad is allergic to fur.

"But what about an alligator?" I once asked. "They don't have fur. And it could live in the bathtub."

"They are pretty cool," he'd agreed. "But if we had an alligator in the bathtub, how would we ever take a bath? And what if it climbed out of the tub and went for you when you were brushing your teeth?"

"Or using the toilet!" I put in, giggling hysterically.

For my birthday that year, I was thrilled when Zac gave me a turtle. Ginger lived in my room in a terrarium that I placed near the window. That way, she had a nice view of Lafayette Square, the old maple trees lining the block, and all the colorful houses.

Thinking about that day warmed up my chilly mood. It occurred to me that Zac had given Ginger to me because he knew I could handle taking care of her. And I realized that even if my parents had paid Zac to hang out with me, they didn't have to pay him to love me. I finally gave my brother a half smile, and in return he gave me a wink.

"Turtles, turtles, turtles," Dad said. He began riffling through his thick pile of brochures. "Helicopter tours…parasailing…*turtle sanctuary*!" He triumphantly held up a pamphlet with a giant sea turtle on the front.

That night, back at the hotel, I logged on to my e-mail and was surprised by how many messages were waiting for me. Ben, who sat behind me at school, asked if I had wrestled any alligators. Abby gave me a full report on how Ginger was doing and added, “She doesn’t seem at all homesick.” Ms. Swain wanted to know how I was enjoying Brazil and if I had decided what my extra-credit assignment would be.

How could I possibly pick one topic? There was the historic old section of Salvador, the beautiful beaches, the turtle sanctuary tomorrow, and, of course, we’d be heading to the rainforest next week!

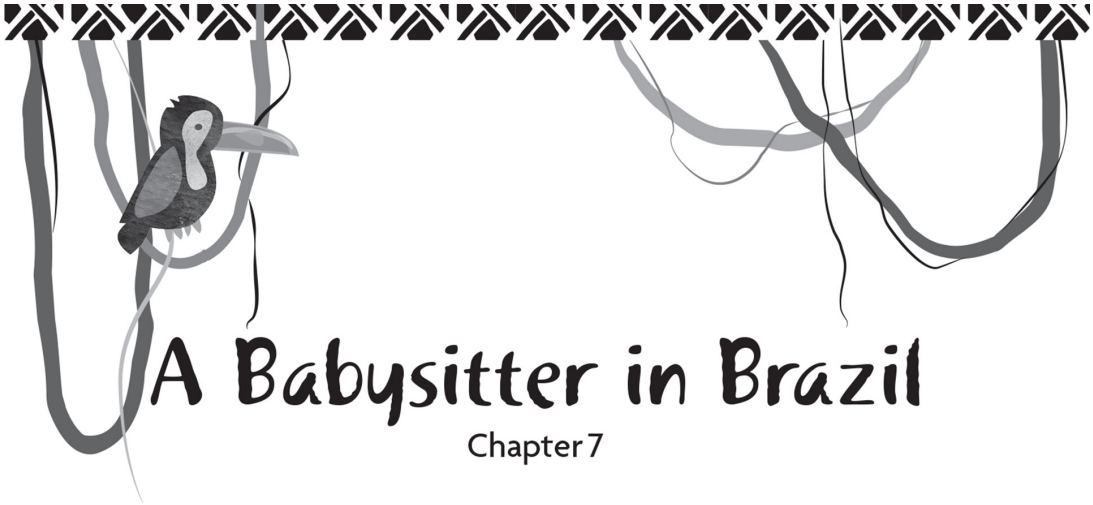
I touched my compass necklace to make sure it was still around my neck, and thought of Ama’s travel journal. I was up to a part where she was describing a trip to India. She had pasted in a photo of herself sitting on the back of an elephant. She looked so small compared to the elephant, but her smile was huge. Reading about my grandmother’s adventures made me feel almost as if I were there with her.

That’s when it hit me. For my Brazil assignment I’d create a travel journal, like Ama’s. Only, instead of old-fashioned writing in a notebook, I’d do a classroom blog and include photos of my trip!

I hit reply and began to type:

Dear Ms. Swain,

I’m having a great time in Brazil and would like to share my experiences with the class. What if I created a blog for my extra-credit project and called it “Olá, Brasil!” I’ll write about what I’ve seen and done, and I’ll include lots of photos…



A Babysitter in Brazil

Chapter 7

The next morning after breakfast, we left the hotel and headed into town, walking past rows of shops that leaned tightly against one another as if they were all one big happy family.

I was still slightly irked about the fact that Mom and Dad thought I still needed a babysitter. Couldn't they have called Zac something else, like my personal assistant? Or my bodyguard?

When my parents headed off to rent sea kayaks, I asked Zac if we could go shopping.

"Shopping? We're at the beach in Brazil—not at the mall. We should go parasailing. Or snorkeling! Or—"

"But look at all these cute little shops! I want to get something with my birthday money."

"Seriously? You come all this way to see the wonders of Brazil, and now you just want to shop?"

Zac was wrong about my coming all this way to see the wonders of Brazil. Sure, I had been looking forward to it—but the real reason I had wanted to visit Brazil so badly was to spend time with *him*. I had thought he'd feel the same way, but apparently I was wrong about that.

"Don't forget you're getting *paid* to hang out with me," I teased. "That makes *me* the boss."

Zac rolled his eyes and sighed, but I decided not to let his bad attitude

ruin my day.

All around us, the shops bustled with tourists. They were speaking all sorts of languages I couldn't understand, but the laughter sounded just like it did in St. Louis. Laughter—a universal language. Hey, my first travel discovery! Maybe I could put that in my blog.

In the center of town was a statue of a beautiful mermaid wearing piles of necklaces, her dark hair flowing. I stopped to gaze at her. She seemed so serene, and yet confident.

"You coming?" Zac called out impatiently.

I took a photo of the mermaid, and for a moment I imagined what she'd look like if she came to life and was swimming in the sea.

"Cricket!" Zac snapped me out of my daydream, and I ran to catch up to him.

Some of the cramped and cozy shops had so much merchandise that it spilled out onto tables outside. One of the friendly shopkeepers beckoned me to a display of handmade jewelry and spoke to me in Portuguese. I turned to Zac to interpret, but he was still standing at the previous shop, looking at T-shirts on display outside.

"Zac?" I called out.

"Just a minute!" he called back as he held up a green shirt with a soccer ball on it.

Great! He kept telling *me* to hurry, and now here *he* was lagging behind when I needed him.

The shopkeeper repeated what she had said more slowly, but I just shrugged and smiled awkwardly, and then took out my camera and started taking pictures. After the first couple of photos, including one of the shopkeeper smiling at me, I began to loosen up and enjoy myself. No matter where I am, I always feel at home when I'm taking photos.

I took lots of pictures of the colorful stores, crammed from floor to ceiling with trinkets and treasures. Some sold glossy postcards of the ocean and palm trees, seashells with "Brasil" painted on them, and wooden turtle key chains. Others had paintings and sculptures by local artists. In one shop a woman was weaving purses to sell, and in another, beautiful handmade necklaces and bracelets fashioned from local plants and nuts sat next to exquisite pearl earrings. Yet another store was stocked with citrus- and melon-scented soaps that smelled so good I was tempted to take a bite out of them.

We paused at a clothing store with *"Moda Praia"* painted in fancy lettering on the sign. Colorful wish ribbons adorned the doorway, and vibrant patterns on the simple clothes made them look like pieces of artwork. I just had to go in.

Zac groaned. “How long is this going to take?” he asked, wearing his I-am-totally-bored face.

I ignored him and pushed open the shop’s door.

The lady at the counter smiled. “Olá!” she said brightly. She looked familiar, but I couldn’t quite place her.

“Olá,” I replied with a smile.

Across the store I spotted a dress so beautiful that it made my heart skip a beat. Layers of magenta, yellow, purple, and green looked like a festival of color. I had always admired the clothes Ama brought home from her many journeys. Whenever she showed up at a school event, I could bet that my grandmother would be the only person wearing a caftan from West Africa or a kimono from Japan. Abby would be so excited if she saw me wearing this dress! She always says I should wear more color.

“What do you think of this one?” I asked Zac, holding the dress up in front of me.

“It’s perfect,” he said, not even bothering to look.

I rolled my eyes and hung the dress back up. I could always come back later, maybe with Mom.

“Thank you—obrigada,” I said to the shopkeeper, trying out the word that Zac had taught me at the restaurant last night.

“Finally!” my brother exclaimed as we walked into the blinding sunshine. It took my eyes a few moments to adjust. “Are you done shopping yet?” he asked, not even hiding the boredom in his voice.

I nodded and saw Zac’s mood shift from dour to ecstatic.

“Awesome!” he exclaimed. “Let’s go back to the hotel so you can change. I’m already wearing my swim trunks.”

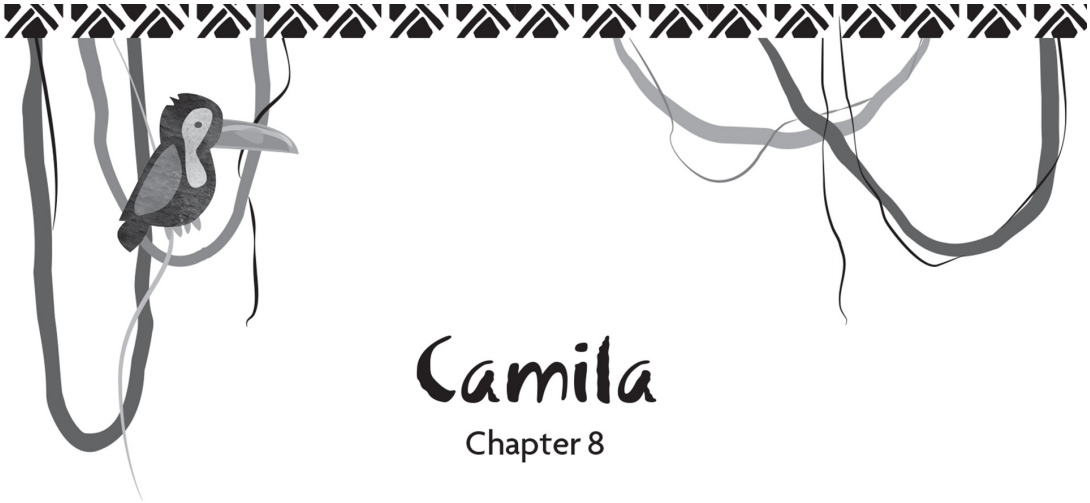
I had to think fast—the last thing I wanted was to make a fool of myself again in the ocean in front of Zac. “Um, that’s okay,” I said. “Let’s just go straight to the beach.”

Zac scratched the back of his head. “Are you sure? I don’t mind going back to the hotel.”

Now that he was being nice to me, I felt a wave of guilt wash over me for dragging him to all the stores. “You’ve been waiting for me all morning. I don’t want to stand between you and the ocean any longer.”

He broke into a wide smile. “Thanks, Cricket.”

I smiled back at him, even though his enthusiasm left no doubt that he was more excited to get to the beach than to hang out with me.



Camila

Chapter 8

When we got to the beach, the sand was soft and Zac was instantly barefoot. About a half second later, so was I. As we walked, the sand beneath me grew firmer and harder. I glanced down. Flat expanses of pocked brown rock jutted toward the sea for what seemed like blocks and blocks. It looked like the surface of the moon.

"How does it feel to walk on the bottom of the ocean?" Zac asked.

I shook my head in confusion. Was he teasing me again?

"It's low tide right now," he explained. "In a few hours, when the tide comes in, this will all be covered with water."

Zac knelt down and motioned for me to join him. "Look," he said, pointing into a shallow pool.

A shell stirred and scampered away.

"What was that?" I asked, reaching for my camera.

Zac lit up. "Look closer," he said.

I leaned in. Other shells were moving, too. And they seemed to have legs. They weren't just shells, but hermit crabs!

Zac waved me over to another small pool of water. It was less than a foot around and only a few inches deep—and filled with a parade of pastel colors.

"That's coral," Zac explained. "I learned about this in my oceanography class. It looks like rock, but it's actually living and provides shelter for a lot of

fish and other creatures."

"Look!" I exclaimed, pointing. A tiny black fish darted around quickly, before retreating behind some nubby pink coral.

Instinctively, I started snapping pictures. But when I looked at the photos, I realized I was only photographing my own reflection on the surface of the water. That's when I remembered that my camera was waterproof!

The camera had been a gift from Ama for my tenth birthday. When I first opened the box, I was excited, but also confused—where could I possibly use an underwater camera in St. Louis?

"Is this to use at the pool?" I asked.

"The pool, the bathtub, streams, rivers, lakes, oceans," Ama said, sneaking a taste of lemon buttercream frosting off my birthday cake. "You never know when you'll need a camera that can shoot on land and sea. You're an award-winning photographer, Lea—you should have a good camera!"

"But Ama, how am I supposed to use an underwater camera without going underwater?" She knew that I preferred to swim freestyle with my face above the surface.

"I didn't even learn how to swim until I was twice your age," she replied. "You're capable of more than you know, Lea."

She saw the doubt in my eyes and gave me a hug. "We'll work on it together," Ama promised. "You'll use that camera underwater someday when the time is right. There's no hurry."

But Ama passed away before she had a chance to fulfill her promise.

I dipped my camera lens into the water. Inches beneath the glassy surface of the tide pool I witnessed another world. My camera captured scenes I could not even see from the surface. Plants sprouted out of the bumpy, multicolored coral, where small fish and other creatures sought refuge.

As I made my way across the tide pools with my camera, I marveled at this new world revealing itself to me. It reminded me of the dioramas we had made in third grade, each a scene from a story we had read. Inside each tide pool were hundreds of stories. I could have spent hours exploring. Maybe I did. I lost track of time.

I stood up and looked around for Zac. He was on the shore sitting on some rocks, and his hair was wet.

"Did you go in the water?" I asked as I made my way toward him.

"Just a quick swim," he said. "Mostly I've been sitting here and watching the waves. Did you get your pictures?"

I nodded and sat down next to him. "Lots of them," I said. "Want to see?" I was anxious to show off my photography skills.

“Maybe later,” he said. “I’m starved. Are you hungry?”

I pretended to look out at the ocean to disguise how hurt I felt that he wasn’t interested in my photos. *Just when I thought things between us were getting back to normal…*

“Yeah, sure,” I said sullenly, making no attempt to hide my disappointment.

“Great—I’ll go get lunch. You can wait here if you want.” He stood up and stretched before running down the beach toward a food stand.

I sighed and decided to take more photos while I waited for him. There were lots of families around—some were sprawled on beach towels, others sat under the shade of umbrellas staked into the sand—and they were every kind of color and complexion I could imagine. It was as if people from every part of the world had all gathered on the beach in Brazil. I started taking photos for my blog. I took some photos of one family that all had the same red hair, same red sunburn, and same British accent. There were a lot of people in the water, including children much younger than me.

I trained my camera on a swimmer making her way toward the shore with long, strong strokes. What I would have given to be able to swim like that! As she pulled herself out of the water, I realized that she was the same girl who had been at the restaurant the night before. The one who had waved to me. She caught me staring at her, and a flash of recognition shone on her face.

“Olá!” she shouted. She broke into a jog, heading straight for me.

“Olá?” I said tentatively. Did she remember what a fool I had made of myself with the super-spicy stew?

The girl’s brown eyes were shining. She wrung out her wet hair and fashioned it in a tight bun without even using clips or a rubber band.

“*Olá, meu nome é Camila! Você está visitando?*” she said in a rush.

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. “Um…I don’t speak Portuguese,” I said apologetically.

The girl let go of a bright giggle. Her smile was kind, and I could tell that she wasn’t laughing *at* me. “I can speak English,” she said with a lilting Brazilian accent. “You are from the United States, correct? I think we should be friends, don’t you?”

Before I could answer, she exclaimed, “Yes! Let’s be friends!”

And that’s how I met the whirlwind named Camila Cavalcante.

By the time I spotted Zac heading back with lunch, Camila had already told me all about herself. She had been talking so fast that it was hard to follow her, but from what I could understand, she was ten years old like me, and her mother owned a clothing boutique.

Camila had lots of relatives in Chicago and she visited them every year, which explained why her English was so good. School was out, and she was on her summer vacation.

"I like to swim while my *mãe*, my mother, eats lunch," she explained, waving to someone sitting on a nearby bench. When the woman waved back, I recognized her from Moda Praia, the clothing store where I had seen the beautiful dress.

Camila was so animated when she spoke. Her hands were in constant motion and she thought nothing of leaning close to talk as if we were sharing secrets. Back home, it usually takes me a long time to make friends since, unlike Zac, I can be kind of quiet around new people. But with Camila, quiet wasn't an option. She asked me a thousand questions, and soon I found myself laughing along with her as if we had been friends for life.

"Olá!" Camila greeted Zac as he came toward us.

"Olá!" he called back. He had his hands full with fresh fruit, savory snacks wrapped in brown paper, and smoothies.

"This is my new friend, Camila—" I started to say. But before I could finish introducing them, Zac and Camila were chattering away in Portuguese. Every time I tried to get a word in, one of them would speak louder or start laughing at something the other said. I couldn't understand either of them. It was as though Zac and Camila were the friends, and I was just some stranger standing awkwardly nearby. When they laughed, I tried to laugh along, too. But it was frustrating not to understand what they were saying.

Suddenly Zac's stomach growled so loudly that Camila and I burst out laughing. He blushed and excused himself as he took a big bite of pastry. Now that his mouth was full, I was finally able to continue my conversation with Camila.

She pointed to my wrist. "You have a wish bracelet," she noted. "Orange is for courage."

I tugged at the ribbon, hoping to accidentally-on-purpose loosen one of the three knots. "I'm really hoping it starts working soon," I told her. I thought about my failed attempts at venturing into the ocean. So far, the bracelet had given me nothing but false hope.

I swallowed back the tightness in my throat and bit into a banana. It was smaller than the ones at home and much sweeter.

"You have to have patience," Camila explained. "Sometimes your wish

comes true before you even notice it."

I nodded, grateful for Camila's encouragement.

Zac offered Camila some fruit, but she was content just to keep talking. I bit into the other pastry Zac had brought. He told me it was called *pastel de forno*. The tender golden piecrust was folded and crimped so that I could eat it with one hand, and it was stuffed with a deliciously spiced meat that left me wanting more.

Zac polished off the last of his lunch and washed it down with an *açaí* berry smoothie. "Ladies," he said, "if you don't mind, I'll go for a swim while you chat."

Before we could reply, he went off sprinting toward the water.

"You're a really great swimmer," I told Camila as we watched Zac doing the backstroke. "I wish I could swim like you."

She shrugged. "I grew up at the beach. My mother jokes that I could swim before I could walk."

Camila was surprised when I told her that I had never seen the ocean before, and even more surprised when I revealed that I was afraid to put my face in the water. "I got hit by a wave and I thought I was going to drown," I confessed. It was so easy to talk to her.

Instead of laughing, Camila confided, "I am afraid of…" She paused, then whispered, "I'm afraid of heights."

"Lots of people are," I assured her.

I thought about Ama hang gliding in Australia. In her journal she had written that she was nervous at first, so she signed up to hang glide in tandem —with someone else. After a successful, and fun, flight, her nerves melted away, and she couldn't wait to go solo.

"Camila," I asked, "is there someplace near here where the waves aren't quite as big? I really do want to swim in the ocean, but, well—"

Just then, Zac ran up to us and grabbed a towel to dry off. "We're late!"

"Late for what?" I asked.

"Turtles. Remember the turtle sanctuary?"

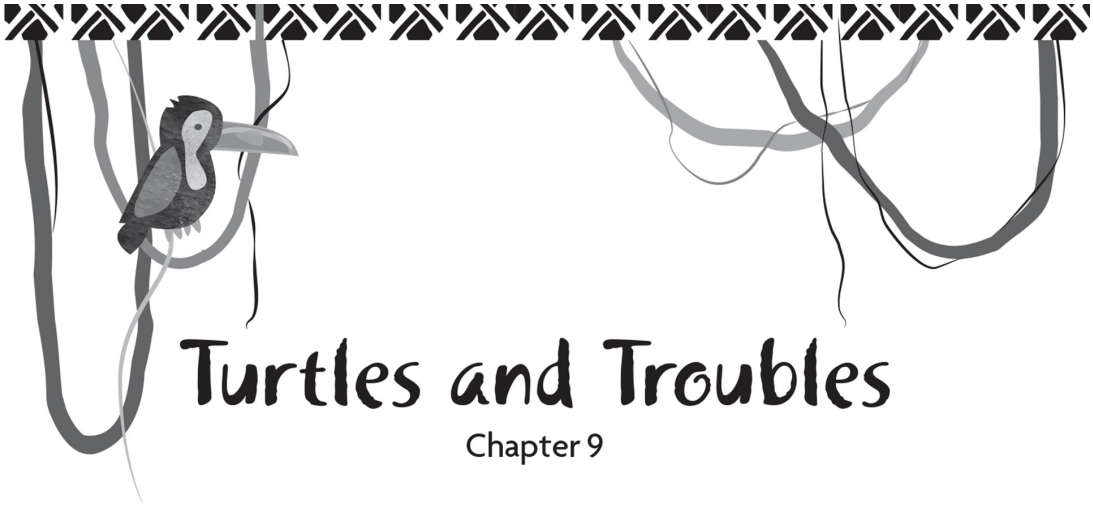
I had forgotten. Still, as excited as I was to go to the sanctuary, I was sad to leave my new friend. I turned to Camila. "Can we meet again later?"

"*Claro que sim*—of course! I'll be at Moda Praia all afternoon," she said. "Come by when you're free."

I was startled when Camila gave me a huge good-bye hug, but then I hugged her back and we both grinned.

As Zac and I headed back to the hotel, I asked him, "How do you say 'friend' in Portuguese?"

“*Amiga*,” he said.
“*Amiga*,” I repeated. I had made an amiga in Brazil!



Turtles and Troubles

Chapter 9

Mom and Dad were waiting for us at the hotel. Both looked slightly sunburned and majorly happy.

"We had a great time kayaking!" Dad enthused.

"He wanted to bring a kayak home, but couldn't figure out how to fit it in a suitcase," Mom said, laughing.

"Who's ready to *see* turtles?" my father asked. "Get it? *Sea* turtles…"

Zac and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

The sanctuary was about a mile away, and we decided to walk. Zac and Dad led the way as Mom and I followed and I told her all about Camila.

We made our way down a closed-off street, and in the distance I could see the entrance for the turtle sanctuary with a big sign overhead that read "*Amigos do Oceano Santuário das Tartarugas Marinhas*." Dad paid and we got our hands stamped with a cute turtle design.

As the tour guide led us into the sanctuary, I took in all the sights, snapping pictures whenever I could. First we walked through an acrylic walkway cut through the center of a giant aquarium. All around us were turtles, fish, and other sea creatures. It was so cool. *Is this what it's like to swim underwater in the ocean?* I wondered. *Is this what I have been missing?*

We continued down the path, where life-size wooden cutouts of sea turtles towered over me. We passed pristine pools that held the biggest turtles I had ever seen. On the other side of the path, tiny baby turtles waddled

around smaller pools. I couldn't wait to write about this in my blog!

The guide stopped and spoke in Portuguese as I took photos for my blog. Zac translated: "Until about thirty years ago, little was known about the sea turtles. They used to be hunted for their meat and eggs and their beautiful shells. We didn't realize that it takes thirty years for them to be old enough to reproduce and that they were becoming endangered. Now there are laws against poaching them and organizations, like *Amigos do Oceano*, that help them."

I looked at the turtles of different colors and sizes, and couldn't help thinking of Ginger. My heart ached at the thought of them ever becoming extinct.

"What about these?" I asked, pointing to the small pool that held the baby turtles. "Is this where they're born?"

Zac turned to the guide and began speaking in Portuguese. As they talked, Zac's voice rose and he looked like he had just won a prize.

"What?" I asked, tapping his shoulder. "Zac, what is he saying?"

At last, my brother and the guide parted. "Guess what!" Zac began excitedly. "Tonight is one of the nights the baby turtles hatch and make their way to the ocean."

My eyes grew big. "Tonight?"

Zac nodded. "The volunteer says we can watch as long as we're respectful of the turtles and don't get in their way."

"We can go, right?" I asked Dad. "Please, please, please, please?"

"Hmm," he said, wrinkling his brow. "I'm getting a vague feeling that you want to see the hatchlings?"

"Can we?" I held my breath.

He pointed to Mom. "Ask the boss," he said.

Mom gathered me in her arms. "We wouldn't miss it for the world," she assured me.

Back at the hotel, Zac was antsy. He tapped his fingers on the desk and sighed a lot. He had always hated being cooped up indoors. I ignored him as I wrote my first blog post about the turtle sanctuary. Finally Zac nudged Dad, who had just spread out on the couch. "What are we going to do between now and the turtle hatch tonight?"

"All that kayaking this morning has worn me out," Dad said, yawning. "I think I'll take a nap."

Mom nodded. “I’m going to relax and read.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to try surfing?” Zac asked hopefully. “There’s still time for the beach before the sun sets.”

Mom looked like she was deep in thought. “Maybe later,” she mused. “I’ll just read for now.”

“I’m almost done with my post, and I told Camila I’d drop by her mom’s store this afternoon,” I said. “Will you take me, Zac?”

“There’s an idea,” Mom said, winking at me. “Zac, go with your sister, all right?”

“Do I even have a choice?” my brother asked.

“No,” Mom and Dad said at the same time.

“You owe me, Cricket,” Zac sighed as he grabbed his sunglasses.

Just as she had said she would be, Camila was helping her mother at Moda Praia. I grinned when I saw what she was wearing.

“I love your dress,” I said. It was the one that I had admired earlier.

Camila smiled and spun around to show it off. “Me too!” she said. “It just came in this week.”

I knew what I would be spending my birthday money on.

After introductions, *Senhora* Cavalcante said that Camila could spend the rest of the afternoon with us.

“Let’s go!” Camila said to Zac and me. “There’s something I want to show you.”

She led us through the streets of Praia Tropical, and soon we came upon a cheering crowd that had gathered in the town square. Two men were circling each other, kicking and spinning.

“It’s a fight,” I gasped, alarmed.

“Actually, it’s *capoeira*,” Camila explained. “Hear the music? It’s a tradition that African slaves brought to Brazil. It’s really martial arts, but it looks like a dance, and it’s very popular here.”

We watched the young men move to the beat of the music and cheered along with the rest of the spectators. It was like kickboxing and ballet, and the two men sparred to the music like athletes on a dance floor. I took out my camera and shot a video to put up on my blog later.

The young men finished with a bow, and the crowd cheered and started to disperse. I had just turned to Camila to ask where she was taking us next

when Zac suddenly advanced in my direction and pretended to take a swing at me.

I backed away and yelled, “What are you doing?!”

“Capoeira?” Zac said, like it was something I should have known.

I felt myself turn red.

Okay, I thought, *I can play this game, too.* So I advanced toward him, then backed away, and he did the same as we circled each other, pretending to land punches and kicks. To be funny, Zac kept tapping me on the top of my head and laughing. Camila laughed, too. But not me. The more he did it the madder I got, until I shoved him hard.

“Hey!” Zac yelled. “What are you doing? I thought we were just playing around!”

“Sorry,” I grumbled. But I wasn’t.

Camila was bouncing up and down, practicing capoeira with an invisible partner. When Zac turned from me and started sparring with her, she didn’t hesitate to duck and take fake swings at him. She was like a whirlwind! Unlike some of the girls in my class who try hard to act cool and not get too excited about things, Camila sparkled with enthusiasm. I wished I could be more like her.

And yet, here I was, upset with Zac for trying to have fun with me. I tried to tell myself to lighten up. But Zac had embarrassed me, and I couldn’t shake off my hurt feelings.

“Where are we going now?” Zac asked Camila. They had stopped with the capoeira and were walking together, while I followed along, alone.

“You’ll see,” Camila said, sounding mysterious.

We were making our way down the beach, and there were fewer and fewer people. Along the shore, hotels and boardwalks had been replaced by coconut trees, wild brush, and steep hills.

Camila broke into a jog. Zac picked up his pace as well, turning to call over his shoulder, “Don’t fall too far behind, Cricket!”

“Cricket?” Camila asked me as I caught up with them.

“It’s just a dumb nickname,” I said, giving Zac a sideways glance. *Seriously, did he have to call me that baby name in front of my new friend?*

“I like it!” Camila said. “Come on, Cricket!”

I bristled. Great, now *she* was calling me Cricket, too.

As we jogged around a bend, I could make out a little house nestled against the high rocks beside the cliffs. It was a small wooden beach house with a thatched roof. A green hammock hung outside, and swim fins and other water equipment were stacked neatly on shelves by the side of the building.

Snorkel masks hung evenly spaced on a clothesline.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Camila asked. "I love it here. The little house is so cozy, and look at this beach!"

It was beautiful. White sand lined the crystal blue ocean, and lush green plants grew against the nearby cliffs. Still, I wasn't sure why we were here. Camila knew how I felt about swimming in the ocean. Had she forgotten? I felt my jaw tense as I tried to smile.

"It's pretty awesome," Zac was saying. "I could totally live here. In fact, when my semester is finished, I think I may just move in and…and…"

Zac's sentence trailed off. I followed his gaze to see a young woman about his age coming out of the shack. She had bronze skin, and her wavy black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. So that's what had him all tongue-tied.

"*Oi*, Paloma!" Camila called out. "*Estes são meus amigos*."

"Olá," I said.

"Oh…uh…" Zac stammered, blushing. It was as if my brother had forgotten how to speak. No Portuguese, no English. Nothing.

Camila and I looked at each other and giggled.

"I am Paloma," the young woman said in halting English. "Camila's family."

"She means my cousin," Camila explained. "Paloma, this is Cricket!"

I looked at Camila and said, "Please, call me Lea," before smiling at Paloma.

Camila nodded. "Lea," she said.

"I'm Zac," my brother finally managed to say. "Lea's cousin—er, sister." Much to my delight, the more Paloma smiled, the worse Zac got. "I mean, Lea is my sister," he stammered. "I am her brother. We're brothers."

When we finally stopped giggling, Camila explained why she had brought us here. Her cousin, she said, was a snorkeling instructor and guide, and knew the best places to swim. "Places with calm waters," Camila added pointedly.

I gave her a weak smile. I was grateful that Camila had gone to all this trouble to find a place for me to practice swimming underwater. But now, looking out at the expanse of blue water, I was worried I might chicken out.

Then I realized that I had a good excuse not to go in the water. "I'm not wearing a bathing suit under my dress," I said, trying to look disappointed. "So I guess I won't be able to go snorkeling today."

"Oh," Camila said. She said something to Paloma in Portuguese. I looked to Zac to see what she had said, but he remained tongue-tied.

"*Amanhã*," Paloma said.

"Tomorrow," Camila translated. "We'll take you snorkeling tomorrow."

"Amanhã," I said, nodding and hoping that my smile looked sincere. But would I be ready tomorrow?

I checked my wish bracelet and was disappointed to find it still firmly attached to my wrist.

I turned to Zac, who was staring at Paloma but would glance away whenever she looked in his direction. "Paloma's going to take me snorkeling tomorrow, Zac," I said, speaking loudly and slowly. "You don't have to come if you don't want to."

All of a sudden, Zac came alive. In a voice that was slightly too loud, he said, "Of course I'll be there! I, uh, need to accompany Lea and Camila—for their safety, of course."

When we left, Zac shook Paloma's hand and then bowed.

Camila and I tried not to laugh as Paloma looked thoroughly confused and bowed back to Zac.

"Seriously, Zac," I said as we headed back to Moda Praia. "You don't have to come with us tomorrow. I know how much you *hate* having to babysit me."

I was only half joking. The last thing I wanted was to freak out about going underwater in front of my brother and have him think I was a big baby.

"Paloma doesn't have a boyfriend," Camila said, even though he hadn't asked.

Zac perked up. "Dearest sister, I love shopping for dresses with you and watching you stare at tide pools for hours. So wherever you're going tomorrow, you can count on me being right there with you!"

I couldn't help laughing, even though I was nervous about having him witness another failed attempt to swim in the ocean.

After we had walked Camila back to Moda Praia and said good-bye, Zac turned to me. "So, Cricket, do you think Paloma liked me?"

I shrugged. "How should I know?" I had to admit it was sort of nice when he wasn't being a bossy know-it-all. I was pleased that my brother was finally asking my opinion of something—even if it was about his crush.

"Listen," Zac said, "be sure to say good things about me to Camila, okay? That way maybe she'll tell Paloma."

"We'll see," I teased. I loved that my brother was asking *me* for a favor. "Hey, any chance you want to go and look at jewelry with me? I'd love to go back to that shop with the necklaces made from nuts."

"No way—" Zac caught himself and pasted on an exaggerated smile. "I

mean, sure!” he said, adding with mock seriousness, “You know I’d love that.”

Night Surprises

Chapter 10

My parents were in a giddy mood at dinner, and wanted to hear about where we had been for the past couple of hours. When I told them about our snorkeling plans, both were eager to come along.

"We'll be right there with you," Dad said, giving me a small reassuring nod.

I knew that he understood how shaken up I was after getting hit by the wave. Part of me was happy that my parents would be there—but the other part wished they'd be far away in case I had another meltdown. The fewer witnesses, the better.

"What's this snorkeling instructor like?" Mom asked. "You said he's Camila's cousin?"

"Camila's cousin isn't a he, she's a girl. Isn't that right, Zac?" I asked.

My brother, who had been happily munching on a skewer of barbecued pork, choked and blushed.

Dad slapped him on the back. "You okay, son?"

"Zac, did you use sunscreen today?" Mom asked, leaning in to get a better look at his face.

"He must've stayed in the sun too long," I teased. "But I'll make sure he doesn't get burned tomorrow."

"Why, thank you, Lea," Zac said, his voice dripping with good-natured

sarcasm. “You are such a swell sister.”

“You are welcome, Zachary,” I replied, patting his hand. “And you are the best brother ever.”

“I love it that the two of you are getting along so well,” Mom said, reaching out, grabbing both our hands, and giving them a squeeze.

Zac and I gave each other big fake smiles. Then I stuck my tongue out at him and he did the same to me. It was like a table version of capoeira.

After dinner, we headed toward the stretch of beach where the sanctuary guide had told us the turtle hatching would take place. Dad and Zac walked several yards ahead while Mom and I hung back to talk.

“It’s so nice that you and Zac have made some friends here,” Mom said.

“I can’t wait for you to meet Camila,” I told her. “I feel like I’ve known her forever.”

“And it sounds like Zac is quite taken by this snorkeling instructor you met,” she said with a grin.

I shrugged. “I think he’s more interested in seeing her than he is in hanging out with his silly little kid sister,” I mumbled.

Mom stopped and raised her eyebrows. “Now why would you say that?” she asked, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“Well,” I hesitated, “have you noticed anything different about Zac?”

I glanced at him and Dad, who by now were way in front of us. For the first time, I noticed that Zac was taller than my father.

“I suppose he’s become more of an adult since he left for Brazil, but he’s still the same Zac that we’ve always loved,” Mom said. “Why? Do you think he’s changed?”

I nodded. “He’s…he’s…I dunno.” How could I explain to her how I felt when I couldn’t even figure it out myself?

“When we’re together, it just doesn’t feel the same as back when he lived at home or visited during his college breaks. Things between us are just…different.” I sighed. “It’s almost like he doesn’t even want to be around me.”

Mom was quiet for a while, and we began walking again, this time in silence. Finally she spoke. “You know, Lea, it’s probably true that Zac isn’t the same, and that’s to be expected—especially when you have a life-altering experience like going to live in Brazil. But have you considered that maybe *you’ve* changed, too?”

I didn’t know how to answer her. What did she mean?

“I’m the same person I’ve always been,” I said defensively. “Besides, I haven’t had any life-altering experiences.”

“Didn’t your life change when Zac went off to college? That was a really hard change for you. You were only seven then. Now you’re ten and in fifth grade. And in those three years, you really have grown up. You’re not my little girl anymore,” Mom said, her eyes twinkling. “And maybe Zac doesn’t see that yet. But he will, if you give him a chance.”

Maybe she was right. Maybe I needed to show Zac that I was no longer the little girl he’d left behind in St. Louis. But how?

We continued down the beach, watching the golden sun melt behind the cliffs that ran along the shore. Finally we came upon a small crowd milling around a rectangular patch of sand cordoned off by a band of plastic tape. The sanctuary volunteer came over to greet us, and said that the hatching would begin soon. It took forever for the sun to set and the moon to rise, but at last a veil of darkness blanketed the beach.

The volunteer spoke in a whisper as Zac translated. “Usually, lights from the buildings lining the beach would shine bright at night. But the turtle sanctuary volunteers have worked with the hotels to shield their lights during nesting season. The hatchlings use the moon and the sun to find the sea and would be very disoriented if the building lights were at their full brightness. The baby turtles would head to the hotels instead of the ocean.”

The thought of thousands of hatchlings entering the lobby of our hotel was so funny that I couldn’t help giggling.

Zac gave me a stern look. “Stop goofing off, Cricket!”

I was glad it was dark out and no one could see my face burn red. *Did he have to say that? And so loudly?*

“I’m not goofing off!” I hissed. “And stop calling me—”

“Shhh,” the volunteer warned, pointing to the sand a few feet ahead of us. “Look!”

I tamped down my temper as the sand began to shift. At first it was scary, like the ground was coming alive. But soon, hundreds, maybe thousands of little turtle heads popped up. My frustration with Zac was replaced by a wave of excitement as the baby turtles emerged from the sand.

“The eggs are hidden under the sand,” Zac whispered, as the volunteer explained. “The hatchlings break free from their leathery shells, and the shells harden. Then the turtles create a space under the shells and wait for their brothers and sisters to hatch. When all the eggs have hatched, the hatchlings start digging. Somehow they know when it’s nighttime—experts think they can sense the temperature dropping—and that’s when they come out from the

sand.”

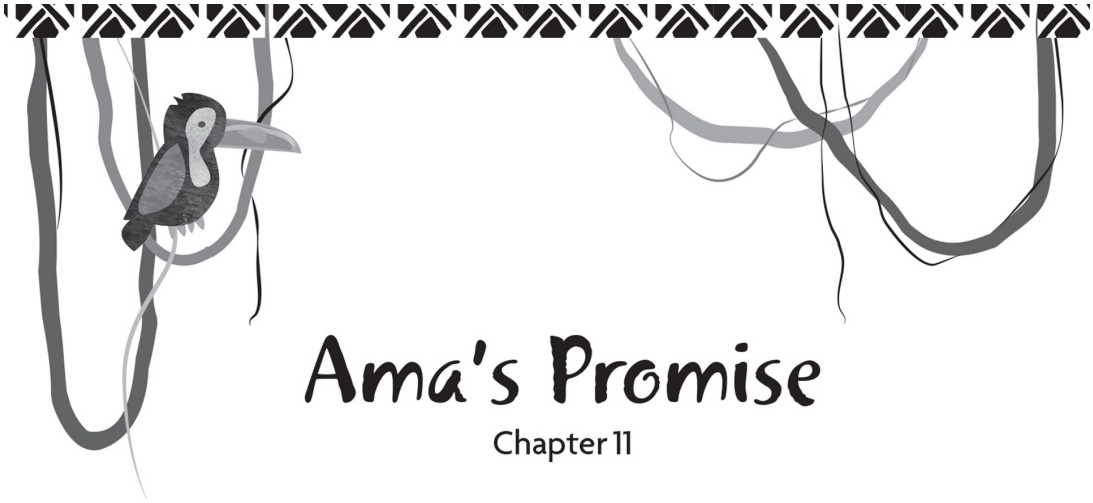
More and more baby turtles emerged onto the beach and began waddling toward the sea. It was like a parade. Hope was in the air. The babies were small, no bigger than my hand, yet their determination was huge.

“They head to the brightest spot on the horizon,” Zac continued. “And that’s the moon over the waves. They can actually sense the direction of the sea as they scurry toward it. They have to be fast because they are easy prey for crabs and seagulls and other birds. The babies enter the water and let the waves carry them away as they swim for their lives.”

Instinctively, I reached for Ama’s compass. It was as if the turtles had their own internal compasses that would protect them and lead them home.

The hatchlings all looked a lot like my pet turtle, Ginger. I wanted to scoop them all into my arms and carry them to safety, but we had to stand back and let nature take its course, and not interfere. So instead, I raised my camera and began to take some photos for my blog. I knew that my classmates would be in awe of this!

I had turned off my flash because it would confuse the babies, so I used the moon as my light—just like the hatchlings did. I also shot a short video of a hatchling making its way into the welcoming ocean waves. Soon he floated off, never to be seen again. Well, not to be seen again that night, anyway. I hoped that he would grow big and strong and be right at home in the warm Brazilian waters, like the turtle that swam with Ama in Hawaii.



Ama's Promise

Chapter 11

Last night was my third night in Kenya. I woke up in the middle of the night, restless. I unzipped my tent to go out for a stretch. The tents around me were dark as my tour group slept. The moon and stars shone brightly over the savanna and all was quiet. Then I heard something that I'd never heard before: a deep, low rumbling sound. At first, I thought it might be one of my tour mates snoring. But then the sound grew closer. Instinctively, I knew to get back in my tent.

The next morning my safari guide showed the group a path of paw prints in the dirt just a few yards away from our camp. We'd had visitors during the night: a pride of lions!

I closed Ama's journal and turned off the reading light next to my bed. As I listened to Mom and Dad snore, I wondered if I'd ever get to sleep myself. I shivered, thinking about Ama's close call with the lions.

When I eventually fell asleep, I dreamed that I was wading into the ocean. The water was already up to my waist when I noticed that the waves were growing bigger and stronger. Afraid, I decided to head back to shore, but when I turned around, I saw that there were lions waiting for me on the sand.

I was relieved when I woke up safe and dry in a warm bed! That is, until I remembered that today we were going snorkeling. And I didn't think there was any way that I could snorkel without facing that scary almost-drowning feeling again.

What had I been thinking when I agreed to this? Zac would probably call

me a chicken, Camila would know I was a coward, and my parents and Paloma would witness my shame at being afraid to swim in the sea.

"Get up, Cricket," Zac yelled, swatting me over the head with a pillow. "Let's go!"

"Stop it," I grumbled. By then, I was imagining all the people of Brazil laughing at me.

"Come on," he urged. "We're all ready and just waiting for you."

That morning, if there had been a race between a snail, a sloth, and me, I would have lost.

In the hotel cafe, Dad and Zac wolfed down their breakfast, and Mom kept me company while I nibbled on some crusty bread that I had slathered with guava jelly.

"I've never seen anyone eat breakfast that slowly," my mother noted. She was on her third cup of coffee. "Any slower and we may miss our snorkeling date!" she joked.

She didn't realize that that was my *plan*.

By the time we got back to the room, I was stuffed with *pão francês*, having eaten three of the small loaves of bread.

"Hey!" Dad said. "I read in the guidebook that there's a shipwreck somewhere around here but only the locals know where it is. Think anyone will mistake me for a local?"

Zac and I looked at his sunburned face and his new *I Love Brazil* T-shirt and *Brazil Nut* cap. We both burst out laughing.

"Lea, get your bathing suit and let's go!" Mom said cheerfully.

"I can't find it," I said as I pretended to look in my suitcase.

Immediately my mother began searching the room. She is always the finder of lost things at home.

"Got it!" she cried triumphantly, waving the bathing suit in the air. "But what I don't understand is what it was doing behind the dresser."

I shrugged. "That's so weird," I said, making a mental note to find a better hiding place for it next time.

Camila and Zac chatted in rapid-fire Portuguese as they led the way to Paloma's beach shack. Mom and Dad lagged behind, flipping through Dad's guidebook to plan the afternoon's activities. I was in the middle, by myself, thinking about Ama's near miss with the lions in the African savanna. I

looked at my orange wish bracelet. *Would I ever be as brave or adventurous as my grandmother?*

As we headed along the beach, I hung back and busied myself taking photos of the ocean and of the surfers and paddleboarders on the horizon.

After a while, Dad let go of Mom's hand and came over to me.

"How are you doing, Lea?" he asked.

"Fine," I said. I looked at my brother, who was now making monkey noises and cracking Camila up.

"It's great to see Zac, isn't it?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Are you excited about snorkeling?"

I nodded again.

"I see," Dad said. "You know, Lea, it's okay to be scared, especially when it's something new. In fact, it keeps us on our toes. We pay more attention when we're scared."

"I'm not scared," I said unconvincingly.

"Well, you don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Dad continued. "But you've been talking about swimming in the ocean since we started planning this trip to Brazil last fall. You didn't come all this way just to sit on a beach chair, did you?" When I didn't say anything, he went on. "I'll be there when we go snorkeling, and so will Zac and Mom. We're not going to let anything bad happen to you. I mean, think about it," he added, looking serious. "If anything happened to you, then who would laugh at my jokes?"

I couldn't help chuckling. "Thanks, Dad," I said, giving him a hug.

As we neared the beach shack, Zac began to quiet down, and soon he wasn't saying a word. Paloma ran out and greeted us warmly as Camila introduced her to my parents. I was surprised when Paloma hugged me as if we were old friends. Meanwhile Zac pretended to be interested in the snorkeling fins that were piled up on a low wooden bench.

"Zac!" Paloma cried. "Olá!"

He looked up as if surprised to see her. "Olá, Paloma," he replied, turning red.

I nudged him playfully and reminded him, "Don't forget to use sunscreen."

Zac had lost his voice, Paloma's English was spotty, and my parents' and

my Portuguese was practically nonexistent, so Camila translated for her cousin. She explained that we would be walking for about half a mile to a quiet cove where the water was calm and smooth as glass. Before we left, we each grabbed our snorkeling equipment: a face mask, flippers, and a snorkel with a rubber mouthpiece.

Paloma led the way, with Zac trailing close behind like a puppy. After a while they were side by side, and he seemed to have recovered his voice. Soon he was making her laugh, and his normal fun-loving nature was on overdrive.

Dad grabbed my hand and gave it a “you-can-do-it” squeeze. I gave him an “I-hope-so” squeeze back.

We were the only ones on the beach. Every time I thought we’d stop, Paloma kept going. Finally, as we walked around a bend, we all let out a collective “Ooooh!”

“We are here!” she announced.

The sand looked like white frosting, and the turquoise sea sparkled under the bright sunlight. Lush coconut palm trees lined the beach. I whipped out my camera to photograph the small monkeys playing on their branches. They were so cute, darting here and there, chasing each other. I could have watched them for hours, but Camila was already handing me a snorkel and mask to put on.

Paloma paired each of us with the right size of snorkeling equipment. I had a hard time slipping the rubber fins on my feet. When I got up and tried to walk around, I felt like an awkward duck. I kept tripping in the sand and almost fell a couple of times. I started to get embarrassed until I saw that no one in my family was very graceful with the fins on!

Together, we all waddled to the water’s edge. There, we cleaned off our masks, and then adjusted them to fit around our heads. I had trouble with mine, but Paloma was patient and showed me how to tighten the band so that it would fit snugly.

As we entered the ocean, Dad stayed by my side, but I only waded in up to my knees. Then I froze. Something was stopping me again.

I watched Mom, Zac, and Camila swimming confidently, using their fins, faces down in the water, snorkels up in the air.

“Go ahead,” I said to Dad.

“I’m fine right here,” he said.

Paloma, who had been snorkeling with the others, came back and joined us. “How does the snorkel feel?” she asked, pointing to it.

I put the snorkel’s mouthpiece into place. It felt funny in my mouth and

reminded me of when I was at the dentist getting my teeth X-rayed. I had to admit that I was looking forward to snorkeling with the same enthusiasm that I had for going to the dentist.

"You look great," Dad said. "We should take a picture of this."

That reminded me! Quickly, I turned and duck-walked back to my beach towel to get my camera, tripping and falling over myself with those huge fins on my feet.

"You go," Paloma suggested to Dad, as she motioned to Zac and Mom. "Lea can swim with me."

"You're sure?" Dad asked. He looked at me.

I nodded with the snorkel in my mouth and my camera's strap around my wrist.

Slowly, I followed Paloma into the warm water. By the time I was waist-deep, my stomach felt like it was doing somersaults, but I repeated Ama's mantra in my head: *Test yourself. You'll never regret it.*

I thought of the hatchlings—the tiny sea turtles making their way across the sand, facing danger at every step. The sea was their one chance at safety. Here I was, scared that I might get salt water in my nose, and those baby turtles were risking their lives to make it into the Atlantic Ocean.

With Paloma holding my hand, I slowly lowered my head until I put my face in the water. With the mask on I was able to keep my eyes open, and I began breathing through the snorkel. I let go of Paloma, pushed off with the fins, and started kicking. The fins worked much better in the water than on the sand, and suddenly I realized I was swimming in the ocean.

I used my fins to propel me farther. At first, all I saw was the rippled sand below, and the water was so shallow that I could touch the bottom of the ocean with the tip of my fin. But before long, Paloma and I reached the reef. Below us were walls of colorful pastel coral. Lush green plants swayed slowly back and forth, as if dancing to their own music. Fish, big and small, swam past. Some flashed by in a hurry; others floated lazily along, taking their time. In the distance I could see Zac diving under the water with Camila. My parents swam near the surface, and when Dad gave me a big thumbs-up, I returned it.

In the beginning it was hard to swim and take photos at the same time, but soon I got the hang of it. Up close, the coral reefs looked like multicolored bubbles of rocks—reds and pinks, blues and greens. At first when fish swam toward me, I'd flinch. But after a while I started taking photos of the fish staring at me staring at them. I was so glad I had my underwater camera!

I thought again to my last birthday. When Ama gave me the camera, I couldn't understand why I'd need it, because she knew how I felt about

swimming underwater. “We’ll work on it together,” she had promised, but she had died before we ever got the chance.

Now, as I continued to swim and take photos, that’s when it occurred to me: By giving me her journals, Ama was with me in spirit—it was her words that had helped me push past my fear. And she was right: I had tested myself, and I would never regret it. Ama *had* kept her promise.

An Invitation

Chapter 12

Once we returned to shore, I realized that I had never been so hungry in my life. Paloma had brought fresh melon and pineapple slices, and *saltenha*, a flaky pastry filled with spicy meat and raisins. The air seemed to sparkle with excitement as everyone talked at once.

"Did you see the schools of those fish with yellow stripes?"

"The coral was like an explosion of color!"

"Was it an eel or a small snake that was darting out of the plants?"

"I've never seen anything like that before—I can't wait to go snorkeling again," I exclaimed, surprising even myself.

After lunch, Mom and Dad headed back to the hotel for some rest while Zac and I stayed at the beach with Camila and Paloma. Zac was acting so goofy around Paloma that I felt as if the tables had turned and *I* was babysitting *him*!

"I'd love to go snorkeling again," I told Paloma. "Do you think we can go tomorrow?"

"That's a great idea," Zac chimed in. Then he said something in Portuguese and had Paloma and Camila laughing so hard they couldn't breathe.

“What did he say?” I asked Camila.

She leaned in close and said, “He said that if you can’t snorkel again, you will shrivel up and turn sour, so she must agree to take you both snorkeling again.”

“Oh, right, for *my* sake,” I said with a smirk at Zac. But at least we both agreed that going snorkeling again was a *must*.

While Zac and Paloma talked, I showed Camila some of my photos. “These are amazing, Lea!” she said. “I’ve lived here all my life, but some of these are like I’m seeing Praia Tropical for the first time.”

I showed her more of the photos I had taken on our trip, and stopped at the image of the mermaid statue I had seen while I was shopping with Zac.

“Her name is Yemanjá. She’s the Queen of the Sea,” Camila explained. “She’s an *orixá*, a sea goddess from African traditions. She watches over the fishermen, keeps them safe, and brings good luck. Yemanjá also protects children, sailors, and the sea. There’s a festival in her honor on the second of February—that’s this Tuesday. You should go with me!” Her eyes were shining bright. “Please say you’ll come.”

“Tuesday,” I said, thinking out loud. “That’s the day we leave to visit Zac’s host family in a town near the rainforest. But I’ll see if I can go for at least part of it.”

“You’ll love it,” Camila said. “People bring flowers, perfume, jewelry, and other trinkets to please Yemanjá. The fishermen gather the gifts in baskets and take them out to sea. Legend says, the gifts that sink have been accepted by Yemanjá. When this happens, it guarantees another year of good blessings for all!”

It sounded amazing. Suddenly I had a twinge of sadness thinking about how much Ama would have loved being part of this tradition. I remembered the time Ama came home from India without her favorite watch. “Where is it?” I had asked, touching her wrist.

She smiled. “I left it in India,” she told me. “I had a tour guide who was absolutely marvelous. But his watch had broken, so I gave him mine. He needed it more than I did.”

“But you loved that watch,” I protested.

“I still do,” she said. “But Lea, when you visit a place, you don’t just take—you leave something behind.”

Then she told me about the other things she had left in the places she visited, such as her gooey butter cake recipe that she wrote down for a baker in Paris, and a copy of *Around the World in Eighty Days* that she “lent” to a woman on a train in Istanbul, and a pair of sunglasses that she gave to a little boy in the Maldives.

As we all started packing up our snorkeling gear to head back to Paloma's shack, I wondered, *What would Ama offer to Yemanjá?*

The Hike

Chapter 13

As the week went on, I made sure we had some beach time every day. Soon it was hard for me to believe I had ever been scared of going underwater. I was still wary of the waves, but had learned how to swim under the big ones rather than let them knock me over. And I always brought my camera with me—just in case I spotted one of the baby sea turtles swimming through the waves.

My classmates were impressed by the photos I posted on the class blog. I even took some underwater selfies with fish swimming past! When a couple of annoying boys in my class accused me of editing the photos on my computer to make them more impressive, I took that as the ultimate compliment.

One evening as I was uploading more photos to my blog, Mom came and sat next to me. “You’re really a skillful photographer, Lea,” she said, looking over my shoulder at a photo I had just posted of a teenage boy surfing. The boy was riding the crest of a wave and there was pure joy on his face.

“Look at him,” my mother said, sighing. “He looks like he’s having the time of his life. If only I could do that,” she added wistfully.

“You can,” I told her.

She laughed. “Lea, I’m too old to learn how to surf.”

“When you travel, test yourself. You’ll never regret it,” I said.

Mom sat up straight. “Wow, Lea, that sounds like something Ama would

have said."

I nodded. "She wrote it in her travel journal."

As Mom gazed at the photo of the surfer, I typed in the caption, "Surfers young and old ride the waves in Brazil, but they all have one thing in common—the sheer joy of being one with the ocean."

"Thank you, Lea," Mom said, kissing the top of my head.

"For what?"

"For the nudge I needed."

The next day, while my mother went in search of surfing lessons, I came up with the idea for a hike.

"We can explore the cliffs—we haven't done that yet, and I can take photos," I explained.

"A hike?" Zac asked. "Just the two of us?"

"What about inviting your father?" Dad asked. "I've heard he's quite the explorer."

"…and Dad, too," I said, trying not to laugh.

"Well, I sort of thought I'd spend some time with Paloma," my brother informed me. "Don't you want to see Camila?"

"Camila's scared of heights, so she wouldn't like hiking up on the cliffs," I said. "Besides, what's wrong with spending time with me?"

"I've spent nearly every minute with you since you got here," Zac said. His voice softened. "But I only have one more day to spend with Paloma."

"That's true, but…" I trailed off. We *had* been around each other nonstop, yet somehow it felt as if we had hardly spent any time together. Almost as if there had been an invisible wall between us. *If only I could prove to him that I'm not just a little kid anymore*, I thought to myself, *maybe he'd actually want to hang out with me.*

Just then, Dad stepped in front of us. "Ta da!" He was all decked out in his Amazon hiking gear, the vest with too many pockets, the complicated pants, the hat with flaps on the sides and back…

Zac and I moaned.

"Come on, kids," Dad said, grabbing some fruit bars and bottles of water and tucking them into his vest pockets. "I just need a moment to write a note to Mom, and then let's go on a hike!"

As Dad looked for a pen, Zac and I glanced at each other, not saying a

word.

Finally Zac cleared his throat. “Say, Dad, I was thinking that maybe you two could go without me—”

“Nonsense!” my father said. “I haven’t been hiking with my kids for years. Come on, Zac, get ready. Let’s go!”

Hiking up the cliffs turned out to be a lot harder than any of us had imagined. The trail started off easy with lots of low inclines and flat sections, and then all of a sudden it got very steep as it zigged and zagged up the hill, and the foliage became thicker and denser. The paths were narrow and rocky, and every now and then I’d trip on a vine or slip on the loose gravel. Zac charged ahead, as if he was just trying to get the hike over with. Dad and I tried to keep up with him, but I stopped now and then to take photos. When I saw two brightly colored macaws perched in the nook of a twisty tree trunk, I stepped carefully off the trail to get a good shot.

“Can you get any slower?” Zac asked as I returned to the trail several yards behind him and Dad.

“What’s your hurry?” I called back.

“Be nice, you two,” Dad said. “Hey, take a look at this!” He pointed to a clearing. We followed him and found ourselves on a ledge looking over the ocean.

“What a view!” Dad said, pointing out over the cliff. “If it looks this great from this height, maybe we should go on the helicopter tour,” he suggested. “I’ve always wanted to ride in one.”

The sea looked completely different from high up, and we could see deep down into it—the coral reefs, and even schools of fish. The boats sitting atop the clear water looked as if they were floating on air, and farther down the shore we saw surfers. I wondered if my mother was one of them. I hoped so.

I adjusted my hat to shield my eyes from the bright sun and slathered on more sunblock. Dad handed me a bottle of water and I took a big gulp. It was muggy up on the cliffs, but I wanted to climb higher. Maybe if we got a little farther away from town, we’d see some wildlife, like lizards and monkeys scampering up the trees! But Zac had already started heading back down the path in the direction we had come.

“Where are you going?” I called to him.

“It’s too hot,” he said. “I think we should head back.”

“Just a little farther,” I begged. “Please, Zac?”

“Whatever.” My brother shrugged and turned around.

Trying to soften his mood, I quickly snapped a picture of his grumpy face. I looked at the photo and giggled. “Paloma’s going to love this one!”

“What?” he said, perking up. “No! Cricket, don’t you dare.” He lunged toward me but I made a quick escape, running up the path.

“Wait up, you two!” Dad called to us.

I ran ahead, jumping over fallen trees and ducking under leafy branches. After a while the path began to thin, and we seemed to be in an area that wasn’t as well traveled. I stopped to take a picture of a braided-twisted tangle of vines that looked like a modern-art sculpture. Suddenly, Dad stepped into the shot. He pushed his hands and one foot through the vines and began to thrash about, shouting, “It’s alive! It’s a man-eating vine—run for your lives!”

Laughing, I clicked the camera, but before I could check to be sure I got the shot, Zac grabbed my arm, saying, “You heard Dad—run for your life! I’ll race you to the top!” and I had no choice but to sprint after him. Still I managed to snap some pictures of Zac, who finally seemed to be having a good time. I got a good shot of him swinging like a monkey on the low branch of a tree with big hanging pods like giant string beans, and a great action shot of him leaping off a rock formation that looked like a face.

Finally, laughing and panting, we stopped to wait for Dad.

When Dad caught up to us, he put his hands on his knees to catch his breath. “Let’s have some water,” he said. “Then I think we’d better head back.”

“Aw, come on!” I replied, squinting through the trees. “It’s like being in a jungle. Let’s keep going!”

“It *is* a jungle,” Zac said, picking a leaf out of my hair. “And I think we may have lost the path.”

“What?” I looked around but saw only tall trees and dense undergrowth. Zac was right—we had completely lost the trail.

“Well, we’re exploring, right?” I said brightly. “That’s what exploring *means*: to forge ahead where no one else has been.”

“That’s what *getting lost* means,” Zac countered.

“I’m making an executive decision,” Dad said firmly, holding up both hands. “We’re going back. Besides,” he said, looking at his watch, “your mom should be done with her surfing lesson soon.”

Zac scowled at me and followed Dad as he pushed his way through the bushes. After hitting a wall of brambles, we turned around. Yet we found that going back was even harder than going forward. The underbrush was so thick

in places that it scraped my arms and legs. We weren't making much progress.

"I think we're lost," I said finally.

Zac and Dad didn't seem to hear. They kept pushing ahead.

"Um, excuse me?" I called to them.

"What?" Zac said sharply.

His tone surprised me, and I flinched. "We're lost," I said quietly.

Zac looked irritated. "Don't you think we know that?"

"Zac—" Dad warned. "Wait! I think I see…" His voice trailed off as he pushed through some low palm leaves. "Yes! Behold, the ocean!"

We stood several feet from the edge of the cliff, and we could see the wide expanse of ocean before us.

"I don't see the beach," Dad said, scratching his chin. "We must be quite a ways farther along the cliff from where we stopped before. Zac, did you bring your phone?"

He shook his head. "I left it at the hotel."

"You left it at the hotel?" I exclaimed. "What were you thinking?"

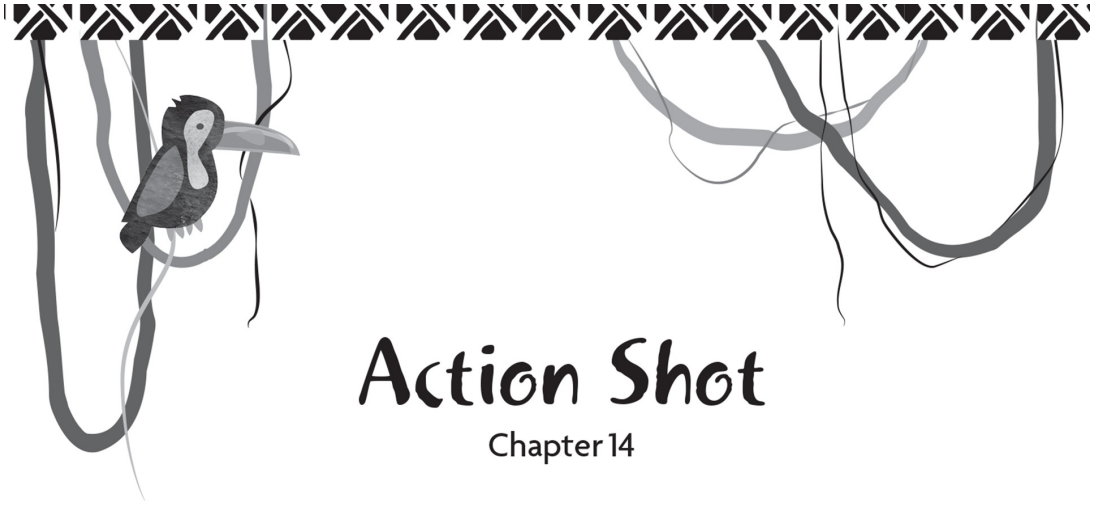
"I was thinking that we'd just be taking a short walk. But then we went on this crazy hike. It's not my fault we're lost."

"All right, let's stay calm," Dad said.

Zac and I both snapped our mouths shut.

Dad took a deep breath and squinted past us. "We know where the ocean is, so we're not lost. It's just the trail that's lost," he said with a rueful smile. "But I think if we just follow the edge of the cliff—" He took a step forward, and the rocks beneath his feet shifted.

Before we knew what was happening, he had disappeared over the side of the cliff.



Action Shot

Chapter 14

Instinctively, I started toward the cliff's edge. "Wait—stop!" Zac ordered, grabbing my arm.

"Dad! Dad!" I cried. I had never felt so scared in my entire life. My hands trembled uncontrollably, and my legs could barely hold me up.

Just then we heard it, the most glorious sound I had ever heard—

"Owww!"

Dad was alive!

"Dad!" I called. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, not really," Dad said. "My sunglasses are broken. Oh, and my leg, too."

I could tell that he was trying to make a joke, but his voice sounded shaky.

Cautiously, Zac made his way toward the edge and peered over the side. I inched forward, too, keeping a good distance from the cliff's edge. I could see that Dad had landed on a rock ledge about ten feet below us.

He lay on his side, wincing as he tried to sit up. Then he shook his head at Zac. "I'm not going to be able to get back up there myself."

"I'll go for help," Zac called. "Lea will stay here with you."

"No!" Dad ordered. "You two stay together." He patted his vest. "I've got water and snacks, so I'll be fine." He gave us a brave smile, but he looked

pale and small all alone on the rock ledge, with the vast ocean below.

"I can go faster without her," said Zac.

"Zac!" I yelled. "I'm not going to hold you back."

"Fine," he muttered. "Let's go."

"Dad," I called, "you're going to be okay, I promise."

"See?" Zac said, as he marched down a path. I had to run to keep up with him. "If you hadn't made us go on this crazy hike…"

What? He was blaming me?

"I didn't make you do anything," I told him. "Besides, you're the one who went off the trail to climb rocks."

Zac raised his eyebrows. "Oh, so now it's my fault that Dad's in danger and we're hopelessly lost? If you hadn't taken that picture of me—"

"What difference did *that* make?" I interrupted. "And here I thought we were finally having fun, like we used to…"

We both fell silent as we continued trudging through the trees. The trail, however, was nowhere to be found.

"This way," Zac said, turning right around a rotted tree stump.

"We just went that way. I recognize that stump. Let's look over here." I pointed to a clearing ahead.

"We've been that way already," he snapped. "It's a dead end."

"You don't know that," I shot back. "You just refuse to do anything that isn't your idea."

"That's not the point," he argued. "Look, I know what I'm doing. And you're just a kid."

I stopped in my tracks. So there it was. He had said what he thought of me: I was *just a kid.*

He opened his mouth to say something, and then seemed to think better of it and kept walking. Zac's words echoed in my head—*you're just a kid… you're just a kid*.

My eyes filled with tears. I was so worried about Dad. I wished Ama were here to wrap me in her arms and tell me everything was okay, just like that day I fell into the lake at Mark Twain State Park. I thought about what she had told me as she wiped my tears away. "You're capable of more than you know."

I closed my eyes and gripped Ama's compass, wishing it could help me

now. But our problem wasn't knowing which direction to go in; our problem was finding a trail that could take us back down the cliff to civilization. And the compass couldn't help us with that.

Ahead of me, Zac was making his way around a rock formation. As I followed, something about the rock looked familiar. I squinted at it, and recognized the face I'd noticed when I had taken the action shot of Zac leaping off it. I closed my eyes against the sting of tears.

How I wished we were back to that moment, all of us laughing and getting along—

My eyes flashed open. I did have a way to go back to that moment.

"Hey, Zac, I think I might know how to find our way out of here," I called.

"Oh yeah?" Zac stopped. "What's your brilliant idea?"

Ignoring his sarcasm, I held up my camera.

"Yes, I see you have a camera," Zac said, throwing his hands up. "Cricket, this is no time for jokes."

"Listen to me," I said urgently. "This can show us the way." Zac frowned skeptically, but I could tell he was curious. "Look—that's the rock you jumped from," I said, pointing.

"How can you be sure?" Zac asked.

"Because I can see it right here!" I held up my camera to show him. "I've been taking photos our entire hike. All we have to do is look at the photos and find the landmarks in them, and we can backtrack our way down until we're back on the trail. Look here," I said, pointing at a bush up ahead. "That's where I took this picture." I showed him the photo I'd taken of a bush with bright red flowers.

Zac's face softened. He shook his head in disbelief. "Okay, we'll give it a try. Lead on, Captain."

At least he wasn't calling me Cricket. Together, we found the tree with hanging pods that Zac had swung from like a monkey, and then the tangle of vines where Dad had pretended to be trapped, and finally the spot overlooking the ocean where we had stopped with Dad just an hour earlier. From there we were able to find the path and follow it back to the beach.

We jogged down the shore until we reached Paloma's beach shack. It was very hot and we should have been exhausted, but our bodies were running on adrenaline. In the distance I could see Camila helping Paloma organize the snorkel gear. We shouted and ran toward them.

Zac spoke quickly in Portuguese, and Paloma ran into the beach shack to get her cell phone and started making calls. Within ten minutes, a rescue team

had mobilized.

“We need to find my mother,” I told Paloma. “She was taking a surfing lesson at the beach near our hotel.”

“Then I know where she is,” Paloma said. “You go with Zac. I will find her.”

“Lea can take us to our father,” Zac announced to the rescue team first in English, then in Portuguese. He turned to me and we locked eyes. “You lead. We’ll follow.”

I touched Ama’s compass. “Okay, everyone—let’s go.”

There was no time to be tired or scared as we hiked back up the trail. Camila and Zac stayed with me stride for stride, followed by the rescue workers. No one spoke. We were all focused on getting to Dad. Even after the main trail petered out, it wasn’t hard to see where Dad, Zac, and I had walked —we had sort of made a temporary trail of bent grass and broken branches. And I recognized most of the landmarks without even checking my camera.

At last, Zac pushed the brush away and we were at the precipice of the cliff. I looked down at the ledge. My father looked pretty beat up and tired, but his eyes lit up when he saw me.

“Dad!” I called. “Dad, help is here!”

“Thank goodness,” he said, waving weakly to the group standing behind me.

I was too relieved to cry or laugh, so instead I hugged my brother, and he hugged me back. We kept our arms around each other as the rescue team rappelled down to my father.

Despite his pain, Dad kept the mood light, telling the rescuers things like “My kids were ignoring me, so I thought I’d do something dramatic to get their attention.”

I laughed loudly. Never had his dumb jokes seemed so hysterically funny.

Once the rescue workers reached my father, they realized it was far too dangerous for them to even attempt to carry him off the ledge and then down the cliff, so they radioed for help.

Meanwhile, I watched as the medics set Dad’s leg in a temporary splint.

“Is it broken?” I called down.

“Spectacularly broken!” Dad yelled back.

We could hear the helicopter before we could see it. It circled above us just like in the movies—only instead of a medical helicopter, it was the tour helicopter! I took photos as the helicopter hovered and a harness was lowered on a rope to the ledge where my father was now sitting up. One of the rescue workers secured the harness around Dad, and then slowly he was raised into the helicopter. Camila explained that the local police and rescue teams used the tourist helicopter for emergencies like this one.

I raised my camera and snapped one last shot. Dad was finally getting his helicopter ride, and I was sure he'd want a souvenir photo.

The rescue workers took us on a faster route back down, since they knew the terrain and the shortcuts. Camila stayed close to my side the entire way, gripping my arm.

"It means a lot to me that you would come up to the cliffs to help us," I said, squeezing her hand. "I know how you feel about heights. Obrigada."

"Our friendship is stronger than my fear of heights," Camila said. "Hey!" She held up our linked hands and pointed to my wrist. "It's gone!"

"What's gone?" I asked, confused.

"Your wish bracelet," she said.

Sure enough, it had fallen off.

I met Camila's eyes. She smiled.

"Orange, right?" she asked.

I nodded and smiled back. "For courage."

Paloma met us on the path. Dad was already at a local hospital, and Mom was meeting him there. Senhora Cavalcante offered to drive us.

"Mom!" I cried, when I saw her in the waiting room. Zac and I both ran up and hugged her.

"How's Dad?" Zac asked.

"He's got a serious broken leg, and the doctors say that it's a miracle nothing else is broken. But he's going to be all right. I need to go give them some information," Mom said, motioning to the reception desk. "You two are my heroes."

Suddenly the weight of all that had happened hit me. I began to cry so hard that my shoulders shook and I couldn't talk. Zac took me in his arms, and I buried my face in his shoulder as he hugged me.

"You were amazing," my brother said. "Dad's going to be okay because

of your quick thinking. I should have had more faith in you. If there's ever anything I can do to make it up to you, Cricket, just ask."

We hugged for another minute or so; then I wiped away my tears on his shirt. "Well," I said, "there is one thing."

Zac got very serious. "What? Tell me. Anything."

I looked him straight in the eyes and said, "You can stop calling me Cricket."

He squinted in confusion. "But why? I've been calling you that ever since you were little. You used to love it!" He tried ruffling my hair, but I pulled away.

"Zac!" I said, my voice weary. "I'm not a little girl anymore, but you still treat me like one."

He paused and then cracked a smile. "C'mon, we're just having fun—"

I shook my head. "You don't take me seriously." Tears started to well in my eyes. I tried to blink them back. "You act like it's a pain to hang out with me. I've waited months and months, and thought about you every day, Zac. I couldn't wait to see you. And now you act like it's no big deal that I'm here with you, and you'd rather be doing something else."

Despite every effort not to, I began to cry again. And I couldn't believe what happened next.

Zac's eyes teared up. My big brother was crying.

"You're wrong about not wanting to see you," he said in a shaky voice. "I've been looking forward to seeing you and Mom and Dad, so much. I love it here, but ever since Ama died, it's been really hard to be so far away here in Brazil, when everyone I love is back home in St. Louis. I even considered cutting my year short and leaving Brazil early, I was so homesick."

I stood stunned, not knowing what to do or say. I had never known Zac to be anything but super self-confident. I had no idea that he had been so homesick.

"I'm really sorry I got crabby and impatient with you," Zac went on. "I guess you're right—I do think of you as being the age you were when I left for college." He shook his head. "You're not seven anymore. I see that now."

I nodded, my heart too full to speak.

"You're strong and brave and smart. I'm really proud of you, Cricket."

"Lea," I corrected him with a smile.

"Right: Lea," Zac said, as if he were trying it on for size. "Honored to meet you, Lea," he said, sticking out his hand for a handshake. "I've heard great things about you."

Someplace Magical

Chapter 15

By the next day, everybody in the town of Praia Tropical was talking about the tourist who fell off the cliff and had to be rescued by helicopter. My father was famous—and so were my brother and I.

Everywhere we went, people shook our hands and asked Zac to share details. He retold the story so often that he began to embellish it, each time adding more drama and chaos. Even though he spoke in Portuguese, I could tell what Zac was saying by his wild gestures. But one thing remained consistent every time he told the story—he always said that it was his sister who had saved the day. "*Minha irmã é minha heroína*," he'd say, throwing his arm around my shoulders. *My sister is my hero.* I always blushed with embarrassment, but I must admit it made me feel good inside.

What didn't make me feel good was that Dad was still in the hospital. Although his leg didn't require surgery, it was badly broken. Mom stayed with him, and encouraged Zac and me to go out and enjoy our last day at the beach.

"I have a surprise for you," Zac told me as we walked barefoot along the shore.

"A surprise?" I asked.

Zac grinned and broke into a jog, waving over his shoulder. "C'mon!"

I ran after him, and soon we were racing each other, sprinting over the sand and making splashes in the warm water that washed onto shore.

I felt a rush of happiness. Things were finally back to normal between us—but it was a new normal. We had talked into the night, but it wasn't like before, when I'd tell him things and he'd give me advice. It was more like a great conversation between friends. We talked about Zac's host family in the rainforest, and I shared Ama's travel journals. Together we looked at photos of our grandmother's travels in Australia. *I always make it a point to befriend the locals,* Ama had written. *They know all the best secret places to visit!*

"Good advice, isn't it, Zac?" I said. "After all, what if we hadn't met Camila—and Paloma?" I added, giving him a nudge and grinning when he blushed.

By the time we neared Paloma's beach shack, we were both out of breath and laughing. Paloma and Camila were lounging in the hammock, and waved hello as we approached.

"Are you ready?" Camila asked. She pointed to a beat-up red wooden boat tied to a stake in the sand and bobbing gently in the blue Bahia sea.

"Ready for what?" I asked.

I could hardly contain my excitement as Zac, Camila, and Paloma led me to the boat. Inside was a basket filled with cold drinks, *cocadas*, the chewy shredded coconut candy that I had grown to love, and *coxinha*, Zac's favorite minced chicken croquettes.

Zac and Paloma whispered to each other as Camila looked on, smiling.

"Where are we going?" I asked as Zac held the boat steady so that Camila and I could climb in.

"To see something you've never seen before," Camila replied. Her eyes were smiling. "That's all I'm going to tell you."

It took Paloma a couple of tries to start the ancient outboard motor, and then we were off. Our boat left a ribbon of white foam in its wake.

The boat began to slow as we neared a rocky bank surrounded by coconut palms with thick trunks. It looked like paradise. The warm sun blanketed us as a light breeze blew and the palm trees swayed lazily. I could hear the call of the seagulls, but what was really beckoning me was the water.

Paloma cut the engine and anchored near the shore as Zac passed out the snorkel gear that was piled in the boat.

"Here, Lea," Zac said, handing me my mask.

"Obrigada," I replied. I took off my compass necklace and handed it to Paloma. She knew how special it was to me and how I didn't want anything to happen to it. She tucked the necklace away in the cooler for safekeeping.

By then I was practically an expert and slipped on my mask and snorkel without hesitation. I looked out at the ocean. A few days ago the water had

made me nervous, and now here I was, eager to explore what was below its surface. With the fins firmly on my feet, I picked up my camera and jumped off the boat and into the ocean.

As I slowly submerged my head into the water, I relished the sudden silence, punctuated only by the sound of me breathing through the snorkel. I sounded like Darth Vader, only I bet that he never got to go snorkeling! I looked around and swam, taking pictures of the coral where the reefs came up near the surface. It was like a whole new world, like outer space, only here on earth. I felt like an explorer.

Paloma swam up to me, with Zac and Camila close behind, and motioned for me to follow her. The sun illuminated the ocean, casting a golden glow through the water. Bright green plants gently swayed as a school of silver fish darted past, and colorful coral walls rose and fell like a roller coaster. Then we rounded a bend, and my breath caught in my throat.

It was a shipwreck—a real shipwreck!

It looked like something out of a pirate movie. It was about the length of two school buses and had lodged itself just beneath the surface of the water on a coral reef. I swam faster, my camera leading the way. If I didn't take pictures, no one at home would believe me! At first, I thought the ship looked strangely fuzzy, but upon closer inspection I could see that barnacles and moss had grown on its surface. Fish swam in and out of the portholes. I took photo after photo, until Paloma motioned for all of us to surface.

"Amazing," Zac said. "Lea, are you getting pictures of this?"

I held up my camera. "It's all here," I said. I couldn't wait to post photos to my blog and tell my class back home all about seeing the shipwreck!

"You can swim around, but not inside," Paloma reminded us.

I gave Paloma a thumbs-up, and then swam over to the other side of the wreck. A school of bright yellow fish swam slowly past, and as I began taking shots, a giant sea turtle suddenly appeared in my view, gliding majestically through the sunlit water. It was almost as big as I was. I gasped with excitement—wondering if I should try to follow it, fumbling as salt water seeped into my mouthpiece, and then—*I dropped my camera.*

I reached for it, but it was already below my feet. My heart turned over as I watched my camera—my camera from Ama with all my Brazil photos on it—fall slowly through the water and out of my reach. A cloud of small fish darted away from a pile of rusted chain where they had been hiding as my camera came to rest on the hull of the ship.

I began to chide myself. The camera had a cord for my wrist—why hadn't I used it? If I had, it wouldn't have slipped from my hands. In my haste to get into the water, I had completely forgotten about it.

I lifted my head out of the water and could see Camila's and Paloma's snorkels bobbing up and down as they swam on the other side of the ship.

Zac waved to me. "Everything okay, Lea?" he called out.

As I treaded water, I was about to ask him for help, but stopped. This was something I needed to do myself. I waved back, and then I took a big gulp of air and dove toward the ship's hull.

I remembered what Paloma had taught me and blew air through my snorkel as I sank deeper, sending a stream of bubbles above me. My camera was in clear sight. But before I could get to it, my lungs began to burn—my breath was running out. In a panic, I used my fins to propel me back to the top, amazed by how quickly I could swim with them when I needed to.

When I got to the surface, my snorkel was filled with water. I spit it out of my mouth, gasping for air. Then I turned over, panting and shaken, and floated on my back to take a rest.

I had never tried snorkeling underwater, and I hadn't been sure I would be able to. As I floated, I thought again of the turtle. It was so graceful and at home in the water—yet at one time it had been a hatchling, struggling to make its way across the sand. Against all odds, it had not only made it to the sea, it had survived and grown to become the awe-inspiring creature I had seen.

I took another deep breath and dove down to the bottom, determined not to surface without my camera. But once more, I came up empty-handed. Again I rested, and again I tried, this time getting closer. Finally, I filled my lungs with air and swam down slowly and steadily using long, strong strokes. My fingertips touched the camera—and then with a sure hand, I grasped it tightly and propelled myself upward.

When I broke through to the surface, squinting in the bright sunlight, I saw my brother grinning at me. Had he been watching the whole time?

"Lea to the rescue!" he called to me. "Ama would have been proud."

I grinned and gave him a thumbs-up before slipping the camera's strap around my wrist.

The Gift

Chapter 16

It was our last morning in Praia Tropical. Zac had gone off to spend a little more time with Paloma while Mom, Dad, and I ate breakfast at the hotel's quaint coffee shop overlooking the ocean. I was excited to visit Zac's host family in the rainforest, but sad that I would have to say good-bye to Camila—and the ocean. That's when I remembered that the Queen of the Sea festival was today.

"So, what time are we leaving?" I asked, keeping my fingers crossed that there would be time to go to the festival with Camila.

Mom and Dad shared a look and then turned to me. "Actually," Mom said, "your father and I have been talking. And we've decided that it would be too difficult for us to go to the rainforest."

My face fell. "You mean our vacation is over?"

"No," said Dad. "*You're* still going to the rainforest. Your mom and I will stay here in Praia Tropical."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Is this because of Dad's leg?"

Mom nodded and pointed to Dad's full-leg cast. "The leg is badly broken, which will make traveling around the rainforest very difficult."

I felt terrible. After all, exploring the cliffs had been my idea. I started to apologize, but Dad interrupted me. "Lea, I wanted to go hiking and exploring as much as you did. And if it weren't for your smart thinking, I might still be out there on that ledge."

Mom nodded. “Zac sat down with us this morning and told us everything. And when we told him that we were thinking about cutting our trip short, he convinced us to let you go alone with him to the rainforest while your father heals and gets used to walking with crutches here in Praia Tropical.”

“He did?” I could hardly believe it. “Zac, my brother?”

Dad smiled. “Yes, that Zac. He said you were old enough.”

Mom looked serious, though. “We’ve all noticed how brave you’ve become.” She reached across the table and squeezed my hand, her eyes misty. “Didn’t I tell you that you have Ama’s spark? You just had to find it within yourself. What did she always say? ‘*Travel and test—*’”

“*When you travel, test yourself. You’ll never regret it*.” I smiled. “Mom, you tested yourself, too,” I reminded her. “You went surfing!”

“That I did,” my mother said. “And do you know who inspired me?”

I shook my head.

“You!” she said.

Dad raised his glass of orange juice. “To Lea—and Ama!”

“To Ama!” Mom and I chimed in.

My grandmother was right. I had tested myself—and I had no regrets.

Soon after we finished breakfast, Zac returned to the hotel. “We’d better hurry if we want to get to the Queen of the Sea festival before we leave for the airport,” he said, giving me a wink. He must have known that Mom and Dad had just told me that he and I would be going on our own to the rainforest. “Come on, Paloma and Camila are waiting for us at Moda Praia.”

I grinned and picked up my camera.

As Zac and I walked toward town, celebration was everywhere. Musicians lined the streets, their melodies and rhythms filling the air as festivalgoers made their way toward the statue. Zac and I were both deep in thought. Just a few days ago we might have been joking, or fighting, or getting on each other’s nerves. But this morning, we walked together in contented silence.

When we arrived at the store, Camila hurried up to me. She was wearing the colorful dress I had first seen in her store. I had been so busy that I had almost forgotten about it. I glanced around the store and saw that they had sold out of the dresses. I was disappointed, but reminded myself that it was just a dress and that I had something even better to take home with me: my

memories of my trip to Praia Tropical—and all of my photos, too.

"We should go," Paloma said. "The festival has already started."

"Wait," Camila said, running behind the counter to grab a package. "This is for you, Lea." She handed me a Moda Praia box tied with an orange ribbon. "Open it!"

I undid the bow, and my heart leaped when I saw what was inside—the dress! I threw my arms around Camila, and thanked her and Senhora Cavalcante.

"Try it on!" Paloma said, pulling back the curtain to the dressing room.

I grinned and stepped inside before Paloma pulled the curtain closed. I quickly slipped on the dress and looked in the mirror. As I admired the cheerful colors, I felt a wave of joy rush through me. I centered Ama's compass over my heart and opened the curtain.

"It fits you perfectly!" Camila said, clapping.

I gave a curtsy as Zac and Paloma joined in the applause. Then I thanked Senhora Cavalcante once more, and followed the group outside.

The cobblestone streets were already crowded with families, couples, tourists, and locals. The small town had swelled with all the people who had come to pay homage to the Queen of the Sea. Food carts sold light-colored sweets to match Yemanjá's white dress, such as honeyed rice and sweet corn pudding. Camila and I shared a sweet coconut milk jelly called *manjar branco*, while Zac and Paloma munched on puffed rice. Most people were wearing all white or a light blue—Yemanjá's colors, Camila told me, adjusting the white and blue flowers in her arms that she had brought as a gift for Yemanjá. That's when I realized that I had completely forgotten to bring a gift for the Queen of the Sea.

We finally arrived at the mermaid statue. Revelers danced to the beat of the drums and laid their offerings at the base of the shrine, which glistened as the sun reflected in the shards of blue tiles. I looked up at the Queen of the Sea, reigning over the crowd with her long flowing hair and serene presence. She was the loveliest mermaid I could imagine. Paloma had brought her a small bottle of perfume. How I wished I had brought something worthy of her to give.

"Come dance!" Paloma shouted over the sounds of the festival as she and Camila started moving to the beat. They held out their hands to us.

Zac and I looked at each other. Neither of us was very good at dancing. But the energy of the music was infectious, and before we knew it, the girl and boy from St. Louis, Missouri, were dancing along with the people of Bahia, paying homage to the Queen of the Sea.

I bounced up and down, doing my awkward version of dancing. Some of

the kids at school say that I dance like a kangaroo. But I was having so much fun I didn't care.

I shouted over the music, "Camila, the next time you visit your relatives in Chicago, you should come see me in St. Louis!"

"Is Chicago far from St. Louis?" she asked.

"Not really. It's just down the road about three hundred miles. It's practically next door!"

"Maybe I could come, then," Camila said. "I'll ask my parents." She reached into her pocket and pulled out two bright pink ribbons. "For friendship," she said as she tied one around my wrist with three knots, while I made a wish for Camila to visit me in St. Louis. Then Camila extended her arm toward me. "Now, you tie one on my wrist," she said.

"Um, dois, três," I said, counting in Portuguese as I tied each knot.

All of a sudden a loud bell rang, and the crowd cheered.

"What does that mean?" I asked Camila.

"I'll show you," she shouted. "Come with me!"

Zac, Paloma, and I followed her down to the sandy shore. Boats were lined up in a row as if standing at attention and waiting for their orders. Camila pointed at a line of fishermen carrying baskets overflowing with gifts. "They will deliver these offerings to Yemanjá," she explained. "Remember, if the baskets and gifts sink, it means that she has accepted them—and in return, she promises good luck for the coming year."

If only Ama were with me, I thought as I ran my finger around the face of the compass. *She would have thought to bring something special for Yemanjá. But what offering could I give?*

As the first boats headed out to sea, I could hear my grandmother saying, "Lea, when you visit a place, you don't just take—you leave something behind**."**

"Wait, stop. *Pare!*" I shouted, waving at the fishermen. "*Pare!* Stop!" I ran toward the water and kicked off my shoes.

"Lea, where are you going?" Zac shouted.

"Lea!" Camila cried. "Come back!"

I splashed into the water, chasing after a fisherman with leathery skin and kind eyes. He had just lifted his basket of gifts onto his boat and was about to set sail.

"Are you crazy?" Zac called to me over the water. "What's going on?"

"Don't worry," I called back. "I won't be long." I tugged on the fisherman's shirt. He turned with a confused look on his face.

In that moment, it seemed as if the sound of the music and chatter from

the crowds stopped—and the ocean had never looked so beautiful. Slowly, I lifted Ama's compass necklace from around my neck.

"For Yemanjá," I said, motioning to the statue on the shore. "This is for her." I took one last look at the compass, kissed it, and then gently placed it in his basket.

The fisherman nodded solemnly.

"Obrigada," I said, smiling at him. And suddenly it was as if the volume came back on. Cheers filled the air as the boats set sail.

My face was wet, and I realized that tears were streaming down my cheeks.

I felt someone place a hand on my shoulder. It was Zac, who had waded into the water. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Instead, we stood side by side and watched the last boat head out to sea.

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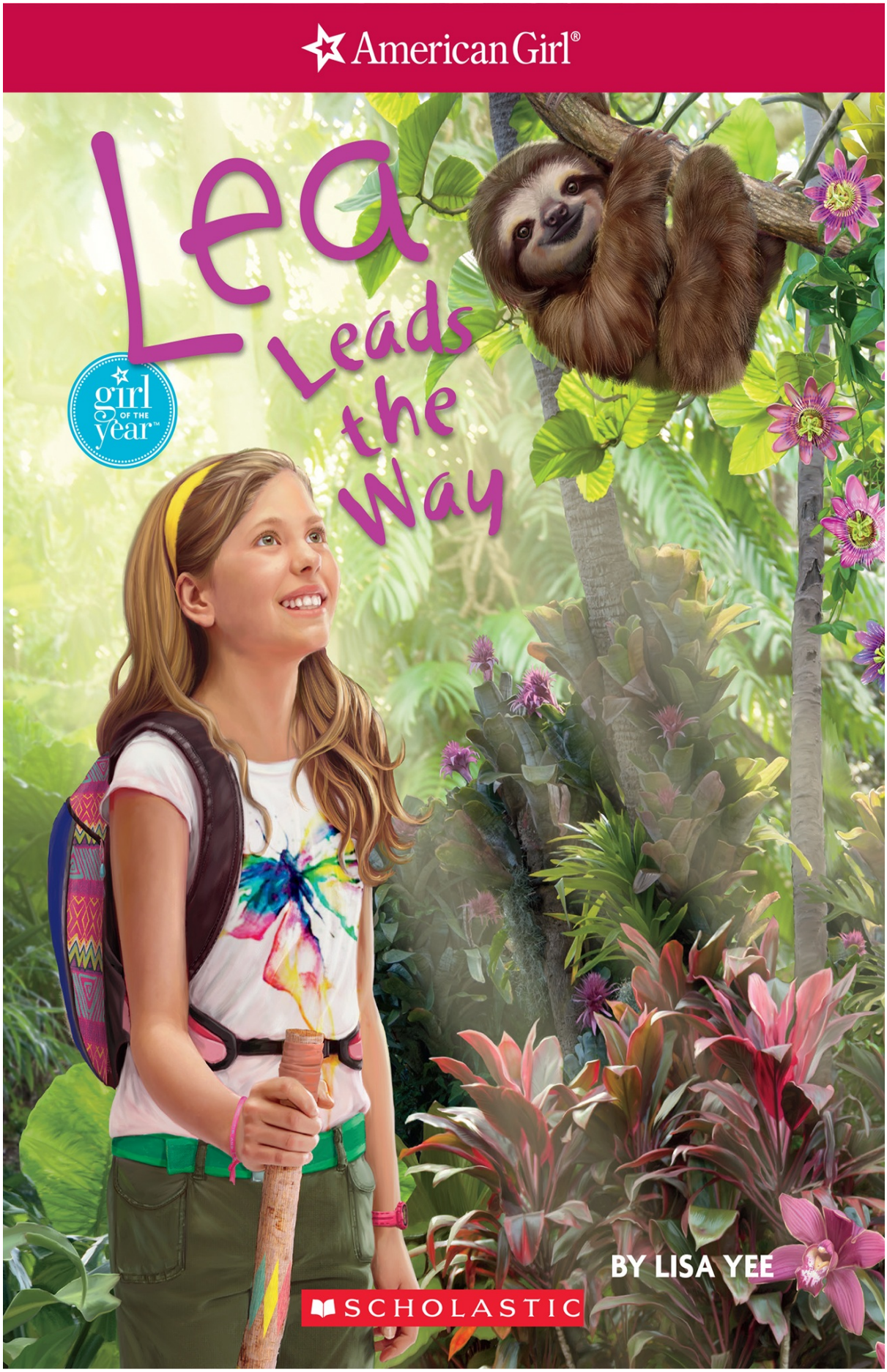
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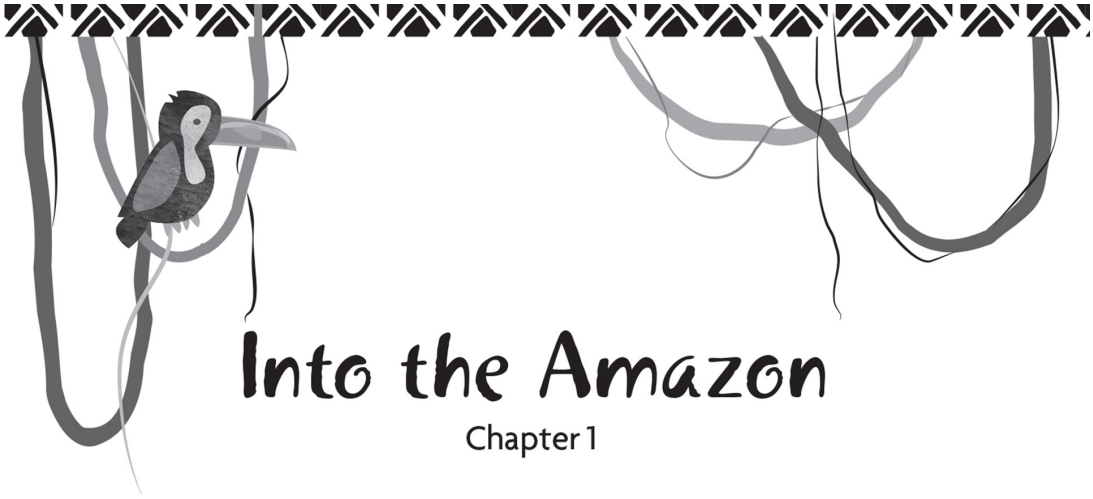


Into the Amazon

Chapter 1

The airplane shuddered, sending a splash of water from my plastic cup onto my tray table. I pulled my seat belt a little tighter across my lap and listened as the pilot came onto the intercom and announced that we were experiencing a little turbulence. He assured us that we would begin our descent into Manaus shortly.

My brother stirred awake and yawned. “Are we there yet?” he asked.

“Soon, Zac,” I said. I wiped up the water with my napkin and returned to reading my grandmother’s travel journal.

“What’s Ama up to now?” he asked, leaning over to take a peek.

“She’s hiking through the woods in Alaska,” I told him.

I loved reading about Ama’s travel adventures. It made me feel like I was along for the ride, like it was just the two of us together again—even though she passed away last year. She had been all over the world, and now here I was, exploring Brazil on my first international trip, far away from my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri.

“I’m on my way to the Amazon, Ama,” I whispered, knowing how excited she would have been for me.

“Did you say something, Lea?” Zac asked. He leaned over me to look out the airplane window.

“Um, I said, ‘I’m happy to be going to the rainforest with you.’”

“Ditto,” he said. He stretched his arms out, and his elbow just missed my

face.

"Watch it, Zac," I said, pushing his arm away.

"You'd better get used to close quarters," Zac said with a grin. "I mean, the Barros family's house is big enough, but it's no mansion. Don't worry, though—you're going to love my host family. Marcos is a tour guide and knows the Amazon rainforest better than anyone, and Olivia is a second-grade teacher. And wait until you meet Tomás! He reminds me a lot of you when you were his age," Zac said.

I smiled, excited to be visiting the family Zac had been staying with during his college year abroad. We had spent the last week in a Brazilian beach town called Praia Tropical. I already missed the dazzling white beaches and the beautiful Atlantic Ocean—and I especially missed Camila, the new friend I had met there. After a week of getting to know each other and snorkeling and exploring together, it had been hard to say good-bye. I touched the wish bracelet she had given me. Its bright pink color symbolized friendship. I wished that our friendship would last forever.

I took out my camera. "Want to see my photos of Praia Tropical?" I asked Zac.

"Are there any of Paloma and me?" he asked.

I smiled and handed over my camera.

Zac skimmed over my photos of colorful tide pools and Mom surfing the turquoise waves. Then he stopped at a photo of a girl his age with wavy black hair and a big smile. She was posing next to her beach shack. Paloma is my friend Camila's cousin, and she had taught me how to snorkel. Zac had a huge crush on her, and I couldn't help giggling as he stared wistfully at the photo.

Zac blushed and continued scrolling through the photos, pausing at a particularly dramatic image of Dad's helicopter rescue. We had gotten lost hiking when my father slipped and tumbled down the side of a cliff. He landed on a rocky platform just out of our reach. It was the scariest moment of my life, but Ama's compass inspired me to create a compass of my own—using my camera! Though it seemed like we were hopelessly lost, I was able to look at the photos I had taken during our hike and use the landmarks in the pictures to find our way back to town to get help.

I may have saved the day, but I couldn't save my father from ending up in a full leg cast. So much for his dream of hiking though the Amazon rainforest! Dad and Mom had agreed to let me go to the rainforest with Zac, but decided it would be wisest for them to stay in Praia Tropical.

Out of habit, I reached for Ama's compass, which I usually kept on a chain around my neck. It had been very special to her, and she had given it to me shortly before she passed away. I had worn it every day until just

yesterday, when I surrendered it to the ocean in honor of my grandmother during the Queen of the Sea celebration. When I put my hand where the necklace had been, I felt a flood of warmth wrap around me. Because no matter where I was or what I was doing, Ama would always be with me in my heart.

I reopened my grandmother's travel journal, eager to find out what amazing adventures she had experienced in Alaska.

> *I had no idea that a moose could be over seven feet tall! In a panic, I froze. It could have been the death of me. There he was, staring straight down at me—and there I was, all of five feet four inches. I slowly backed away to show him that I meant no harm. The moose either got bored with me or realized that a visitor from St. Louis wasn't much of a threat—because for whatever reason, as I backed away, he turned around and silently disappeared into the woods.*

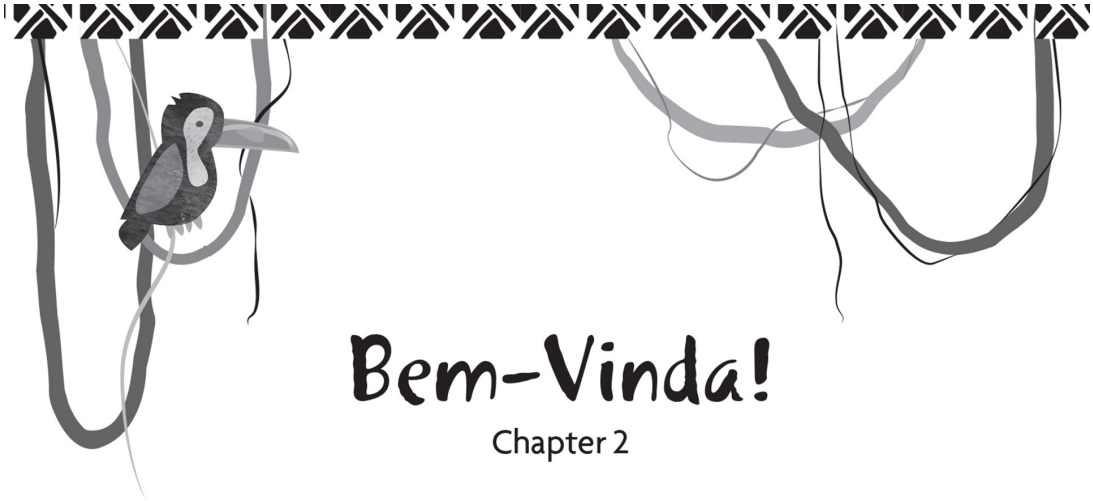
Wow, I thought. *That was a close one.* I wondered what kinds of animals I'd encounter in the Amazon rainforest.

The sound of light snoring made me turn to Zac. He had fallen asleep with my camera in his hands. A photo of Paloma and Zac wearing snorkeling gear was on the display. He was probably dreaming about her.

I gently took the camera and scrolled through the rest of the photos. The shimmering blue water and the sugary white sand were beautiful, but what really took my breath away were the underwater shots of coral reefs, colorful sea life, and an old shipwreck on the ocean floor. I paused at my favorite photo: dozens of baby turtles hatching from their shells in the sand and waddling toward the sea.

My best friend, Abby, and a lot of my other fifth-grade classmates had written comments on my blog, saying that the turtle photo was their favorite shot, too. *This is just the beginning,* I had written back. *Just wait until you see the pictures I plan to take in the Amazon rainforest. I'm going to post lots of photos of exotic jungle animals!*

I couldn't wait for my next adventure to begin.



Bem-Vinda!

Chapter 2

When Zac told me that Manaus was in the middle of the rainforest, I had imagined that we'd land in a clearing in the jungle. So picture my surprise when the plane broke through the clouds and I saw a city skyline. Manaus looked as big as St. Louis—maybe even bigger! I never would have guessed that there was a huge city in the middle of the Amazon rainforest.

After Zac and I gathered our bags, we waited on the curb outside the airport for our ride. Soon, a man in a battered green truck drove up and leapt out. By the way he and Zac greeted each other with wide smiles and a big hug, I knew the man must be Marcos Barros.

"Lea! *Bem-vinda!* Welcome to Manaus!" I instantly felt at home with Marcos as he headed toward me with his arms open. His tanned face was friendly and his brown eyes sparkled like he was ready to laugh. Marcos's black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he wore a chocolate-brown seed necklace around his neck.

"That's a beautiful necklace," I told him. "Did you make it yourself?"

He touched the beads at his throat. "This was a gift from an indigenous rainforest tribe." His eyes brightened as he reached around his neck to unclasp it. "I want you to have it."

"Oh, no!" I protested. "I couldn't. It's yours!"

"A gift from me to you," Marcos said. "Please, I insist. It would make me happy."

Zac laughed. “Marcos is very persuasive,” he said. “You may as well just take it now. Otherwise, you’ll argue for hours—and end up with it anyway!”

“Thank you. Obrigada,” I said, blushing as Zac helped me put on the necklace. I liked the feel of the beads around my neck. They were the size of small marbles, and were smooth and soothing to the touch.

I climbed into the backseat and buckled my seat belt as Marcos loaded our suitcases into the back of the truck. I was eager to get on the road and head to the rainforest as soon as possible so that I could see some exotic animals. I wondered which animals I’d encounter first: maybe a jaguar or a caiman, and of course, monkeys. There were certain to be monkeys!

Abby had made me promise to take plenty of photos. She loves animals, just like me. Her mom is a veterinarian, and they have lots of pets and foster animals. One time, they fostered a miniature potbellied pig. He was so cute!

I gazed out the window as we left the airport and headed toward downtown Manaus. “Um, excuse me, Marcos, but how far is the rainforest from here?” I asked.

“It’s almost four hours to Santa Sofia,” Marcos replied.

Four hours! I wasn’t sure I could wait that long. But before I could worry about it, we passed by a beautiful building that took my breath away. Huge and majestic, it was painted pink with white pillars and had sweeping steps like something out of a fairy tale.

“Wow,” I said, pressing my hands against the window.

“That’s the Amazon Theater opera house. It’s one hundred and twenty years old,” Marcos said, pulling over the truck so I could get a better look.

I wished my parents were here. Dad’s a history professor and Mom’s an architect who restores historic buildings. I took out my camera, knowing they’d want to see this.

“I didn’t expect something like this in the middle of the rainforest,” I said as I focused my camera on the green-and-yellow tiled dome at the top of the grand theater.

“There’s lots of culture and art in Manaus,” Marcos explained. “It is the biggest city in the Amazon rainforest. Over two million people live here.”

Zac turned to me. “That’s more than six times the population of St. Louis!”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

Marcos grinned and pulled back onto the road. “Before we start the long drive to Santa Sofia, I’ve got someplace special to show you,” he said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. “It’s one of my favorite places to take visitors. They just love it.”

“The coffee?” Zac asked. His eyes sparkled with amusement.

Marcos nodded and laughed. “Yes, the coffee. I know how much you love the coffee.”

I smiled awkwardly. Coffee? We were going to get coffee? Coffee is so gross—and sneaky, too! It smells delicious, but once I snuck a taste of my dad’s and it was so bitter that I spit it out. Didn’t Zac know I wasn’t old enough to drink coffee? Over the past week of our trip, I had been trying very hard to remind my brother that I wasn’t his baby sister anymore. Maybe I had overdone it!

Zac saw the look on my face and laughed. “Don’t worry, Lea. We won’t make you drink the coffee.”

I was still wondering about their inside joke when Marcos parked the truck near the river. Automatically, I grabbed my camera, and was glad that I had. Everywhere I looked was a photo waiting to happen. Huge, fresh-caught fish lay on beds of ice, and the smell was, well…fishy! By the time we got to the dock, I had grown used to the smell, but I was still a little freaked out by all the fish lying there and staring at me.

“Oi!” Marcos called to a man in a small speedboat. The man greeted him and waved for us to join him.

“Hop in. This is for us!” Zac declared.

I looked at Zac, confused, and carefully climbed into the boat. We were going on a boat to get coffee? The river was huge and the opposite shore seemed miles away. Surely Zac and Marcos could find coffee on this side of the river.

Zac’s eyes lit up as he secured my life jacket. “Hold on to your camera, Lea,” he said. “We’re going to go fast.”

“Okay,” I said. My confusion quickly turned into excitement. Speeding on the river to a mysterious destination? I was up for that!

We pushed back from the dock and motored slowly to the middle of the river. Then we took off. The wind whipped through my hair as I watched the shore and the city get farther and farther away, and then *vrooom!* Suddenly we were cutting through the water so fast that I had to grip Zac’s arm for support.

“Yippee!” he yelled like a cowboy, waving to the bigger tourist boats as we sped past.

“Look!” Marcos yelled over the roar of the boat’s engine. He pointed straight ahead.

I peered over the bow of the boat. Ahead of us, it looked like the river was split in two: The left half was dark black and the right half was creamy brown. I couldn’t believe my eyes!

As the speedboat slowed to a stop, Marcos explained, “This is where the Rio Negro and the Solimões River converge. It’s called the Meeting of the Waters.”

“Like Mom and Dad’s coffee,” Zac said, sweeping his arm across the scene like a model showing off the prizes on a game show.

I laughed. *Now* I understood. My father always insists on strong, black coffee. But Mom adds so much cream to her mug that Dad always jokes, “Would you like some coffee with your cream?”

“How far do the rivers stay separate like this?” I asked Marcos.

“For miles,” he said. “But eventually, the rivers merge and blend.” He reached over the side of the boat and swirled his hand in the water. “Go ahead,” he urged. “Feel the water.”

Cautiously, I dipped my hand into the water and moved it around. I could totally feel the difference. The black water was cold and the brown water was warm.

I broke into a grin. “This is so weird—I love it!”

I sat back and started taking photos and a short video for my blog. What a great way to start my Amazon adventure!

A Surprise Snack

Chapter 3

I couldn't wait to get to the rainforest. Marcos put the truck in gear, and as we began our four-hour journey, I had my camera ready. I was tired and wished I had slept more on the plane, like Zac, but now I was too excited to sleep. After all, I hadn't traveled halfway around the world to take a nap! I wanted to see the animals—wild, exotic animals!—and I wasn't about to let anything stop me. But before I knew it, the hum of the truck's engine and the warm breeze from the open window began to lull me to sleep. I fought to keep my eyes open, determined not to miss anything.

I awoke with a start and rubbed my eyes. How long had I been asleep? On both sides of the truck, thick bushes and trees brushed past. It looked like I was in another world. I sat straight up when it hit me. The rainforest! We were driving through the thick of the rainforest.

"Why didn't you wake me?" I asked Zac.

"You needed to sleep, Lea," he said, turning to look at me. "You're here for a week. You've got plenty of time to see the rainforest."

But I didn't want to waste one minute. I held my camera up, ready for my first photo of a wild animal. I hoped it would be a jaguar. I craned my neck, eager to take in my surroundings. Even though it was early February, everything was so lush and green here—unlike back home in St. Louis, where the tree branches were bare and snow blanketed the ground.

The bumpy dirt road had very little traffic. After forty-five minutes, we had passed one car with music blasting out of its open windows, a van with a

mattress strapped to the top of it, and a teenage girl riding a brown horse. I took her photo for my blog. But aside from the horse, I didn't see a single animal—not even a bird!

My stomach rumbled louder than the truck's engine.

"Hungry?" Marcos asked.

"Maybe a little," I admitted sheepishly.

"A little?" Zac joked. "That growl was so loud, I'm sure Mom and Dad could hear it all the way in Praia Tropical!"

I ignored him.

"Olivia is preparing a meal for us at home," Marcos said, "but we can stop for a snack."

I wondered where we'd go. There certainly weren't any restaurants or fast-food places that I could see. Marcos pulled the truck over next to a group of palm trees and we all got out. It felt good to stretch my legs. There was a cooler in the back of the truck, and Marcos pulled out a bottle of papaya juice for each of us.

"How about some really fresh food?" Marcos asked. It looked like he was suppressing a smile.

I looked around for a mango tree, or maybe we'd have those little bananas that I'd enjoyed in Praia Tropical. Instead, Marcos built a circle of small rocks and gathered some dry moss to place in the center. Then he picked some small brown nuts off a nearby tree and laid them on a huge, waxy leaf that was wider and longer than a football. He reached into his pocket and took out a stone. I watched as he struck his knife against it with lightning precision, starting a fire in the moss.

Roasted nuts! I thought to myself. This would be a treat. During the winter holidays in St. Louis, we sometimes had roasted chestnuts. I wondered if these would taste the same.

Ama had written in her travel journal that she always enjoyed trying the local dishes of each place she visited. *It's my chance to try something different*, she wrote, *and maybe even discover a new favorite food!* Over the past week in Praia Tropical, I had tasted a delicious seafood stew called *moqueca*, lots of scrumptious pastries, and exotic fruits I'd never seen before—and loved them. Maybe whatever Marcos had in store would be my new favorite!

Marcos sliced open the nuts and laid them face-up on the leaf over the fire. Something was squirming inside! I made a face and waited for him to notice that these nuts were bad. Clearly, he'd have to go back and pick new nuts—ones that didn't have worms in them.

I looked on, horrified, as Marcos scooped the fat, white, wormy-looking things from the nutshells and skewered them on a stick.

"Wh-what are those?" I asked, my voice cracking with disbelief.

"They're grubs," Zac said matter-of-factly. "You know, larvae. Baby insects."

"You don't expect me to eat live worms, do you?" I asked, taking a step back.

Marcos laughed and shook his head. "Of course not—I'm going to cook them first." Then he did the unthinkable—he roasted them over the flames.

After about a minute, he inspected the grubs and pulled one off the skewer. "Here, Lea," he said, offering one to me. "It's *saboroso*—very tasty! Enjoy it while it's hot!"

My eyes grew big. There was no way I was going to eat a worm!

"Go ahead, Lea," Zac goaded me. "Eat it. You're not scared, are you?"

I bristled. I'd show Zac that I wasn't afraid! In Praia Tropical I had promised myself that I wouldn't be scared to test myself and try new things. That was something I had learned from Ama.

I couldn't let my fears stop me now.

Marcos and Zac were waiting for me.

My throat constricted as I took a grub from Marcos, who was munching on a handful of them. The plump white larva had turned toasty brown over the fire, and it was still hot. I took a deep breath. Determined, I stared straight at Zac, popped the grub into my mouth, shut my eyes, and chewed.

Don't spit it out, don't spit it out, I said to myself. *Don't. Spit. It. Out.*

It was nutty and meaty and *almost* tasty—but I was still totally grossed out. I tried not to gag.

Finally, I swallowed the grub and looked triumphantly at Zac. "Okay, your turn," I dared him. I reached for my papaya juice and finished the bottle.

"Are you kidding?" my brother said. "There's no way I'd eat one of those! Lea, you're either really crazy or really brave."

Marcos grinned. "I'd say she's really brave," he said. "Even braver than you, Zac!"

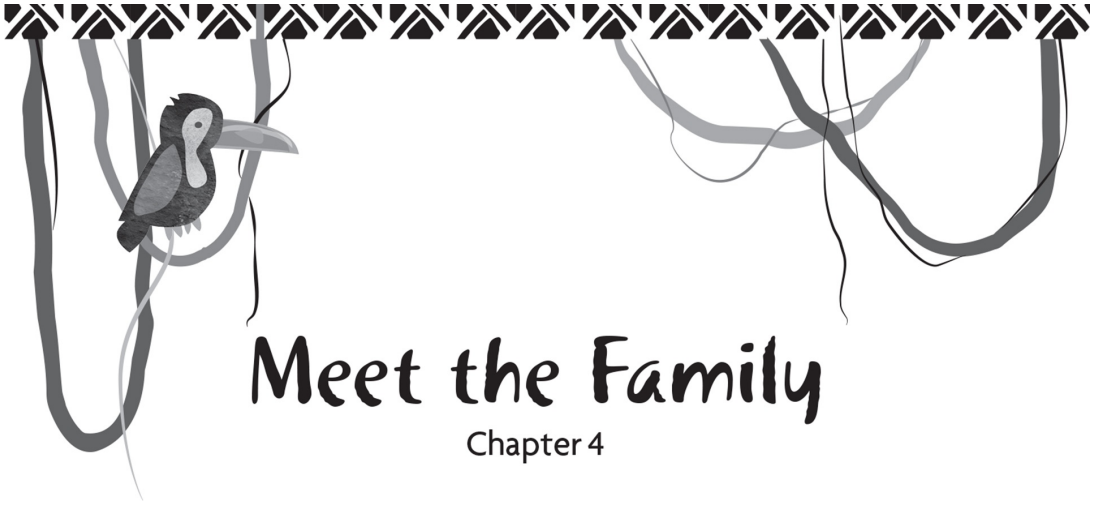
"You're right," my brother said, giving me a wink.

"Here, Lea." Marcos offered me the stick with a couple of roasted grubs on it. "You want to finish these?"

"Um, no thanks, I'm full," I said. I still couldn't believe what I had just done.

I took out my camera and photographed the remaining grubs. This would

really shock my classmates! As gross as it was, I couldn’t wait to blog about it. One kid from my class, Dax, used to tease me and call me a scaredy-cat—all because when we went on a field trip to a dairy farm in third grade, I had been afraid to milk a cow. I’d like to see him call me a scaredy-cat now!



Meet the Family

Chapter 4

After another hour of driving, we veered off the dirt road and onto a paved, double-lane street. Zac let me know that we weren't far from the Barros family's home. Santa Sofia, he told me, was the last town accessible by road in this area of the rainforest.

As we paused at a stoplight, I recognized the lively main street from photos that my brother had e-mailed to us when he first arrived. A grocer was piling watermelons into a wooden cart, shopkeepers motioned customers inside their stores as music blasted onto the streets, and shaded restaurant patios were packed with diners. Every now and then, Marcos honked his horn and someone would wave to us.

We turned down a bumpy road that ran along the river, passing colorful houses set near the water's edge. Some were on stilts, while others actually floated on the water. At last, the truck ground to a stop in front of a stilted wooden house painted a cheerful yellow. Chickens milled about in the huge yard, and the trees were dotted with fragrant white flowers. I glimpsed a trio of toucans perched on a branch and snapped their photo. Finally, some real wildlife!

A tall woman with a friendly smile raced outside to meet us. She was wearing her hair in twin braids. I admired her colorful cotton dress. It reminded me of the one Camila had given me when we said good-bye.

The woman hugged Zac, and then turned to me. "Lea," she said, giving me a warm embrace. "I am Olivia, Zac's host mother. Zac has told us so many

wonderful things about you!”

I blushed and said, “*Muito prazer*,” which Zac had taught me to say when I met someone new. I glanced toward the house just in time to see the rose-colored curtains stir and move slightly to the side. Someone—or something—was watching us.

Olivia turned to see what I was looking at and shook her head. “Tomás, *vem!* Come! Zac is home.”

The front door opened slowly. A small boy around five years old raced out and hid behind Olivia’s legs. From what I could see, he had dark black hair like his father, and his complexion was lighter like his mother’s. He peeked out at me with big curious brown eyes and long eyelashes, and then ran and hid behind Marcos. Moments later, he made a break for it and raced into my brother’s arms. In one fluid motion, Zac picked him up and twirled him around, just like he used to do with me when I was little. The boy squealed with delight and buried his face in Zac’s shoulder.

“Lea, there’s someone special I want you to meet,” Zac said, grinning widely. “This young fellow here is Tomás! Tomás, *esta é a minha irmã—this is my sister,* Lea.”

Tomás clung to Zac the way he had to his mother. Every now and then, he peered out to look at me. Each time I waved, he’d hide again. I continued playing peekaboo with Tomás until I felt something nipping my shoe. I looked down to see a colorful red-and-orange rooster pecking at my shoelaces.

Startled, I yelped and jumped away. When I ran, the rooster chased me. Finally, I leapt onto a tree stump at the edge of the yard. The rooster growled and strutted around me.

“What happened to the big brave Lea?” Zac teased.

“Galo Louco!” Marcos yelled at the chicken. He turned to Tomás and gestured at him to help me.

Tomás ran toward me and scooped up the rooster. Then he set him down in a small fenced-off area of the yard near a red wooden henhouse.

“Please excuse Galo Louco. He’s our crazy rooster,” Olivia said apologetically as she helped me down off the tree stump. “Not too friendly, but he watches out for our chickens, and they lay the best eggs. This yard is his roost, and he’s jealous of you!”

Hmm. I wasn’t sure whether to feel honored or nervous that a crazy chicken was jealous of me. I made a mental note to try to avoid any future encounters with Galo Louco.

When Marcos had said that Olivia was preparing a meal for us, he had neglected to tell me that it was more like a feast. Thick slices of fresh watermelon, mango, and pineapple were piled high on a platter alongside fruits I'd never heard of, such as *carambola*, a sour fruit shaped like a star, and jackfruit, which reminded me of a tart banana. Next to that were plates of grilled fish, corn cakes, and cheesy rolls called *pão de queijo*.

We sat on long benches on either side of the table. Olivia made sure that my plate was never empty. I especially liked the tapioca pancakes stuffed with bananas.

"Try the goat cheese," Olivia said, passing me the plate. "Our neighbors down the river raise goats, and this was made from their milk," she said.

Fresh goat cheese and grubs in one day! Now *that* was something blog-worthy.

As we feasted, I told Olivia and Marcos about the blog I was writing about my trip in Brazil. "My classmates can't wait to hear about the rainforest," I said.

Olivia told me that all her students had been very excited when Zac visited her class to talk about his rainforest studies. "But I think they were most excited to hear about how different life is in St. Louis. They thought it was funny that students in the United States take a bus to school instead of riding a boat!"

"A school boat?" I asked, tickled by the thought of it.

Olivia nodded as she cut up a piece of fish on Tomás's plate. "Tomás just completed kindergarten, and in two years he'll be in my class."

I looked at Tomás, who peered at me nervously and scooted closer to Zac. I could tell that he still wasn't too sure about me. And could I blame him? I had to admit that I hadn't made a good first impression by running around the yard in fear of a chicken.

As the conversation continued, I couldn't help noticing Tomás and Zac. They whispered with their heads close together, and Zac kept making Tomás laugh by making funny faces. I felt a tug on my heart, remembering that Zac used to do that with me when I was little.

"What do you think, Lea?" Marcos said as he handed me the platter of tropical fruit. "It would be a great story for your blog."

I blushed. "Excuse me, I spaced out for a second. What did you ask me?"

"I was asking if I could take you and Zac out on the river in the morning," Marcos repeated.

“Oh, yes!” I said a little too loudly. Trying to be more subdued, I added, “That would be nice, thank you.”

As much as I was enjoying dinner, I couldn’t wait until tomorrow morning, when I’d be sailing down the famed Amazon River, exploring the rainforest, and seeing wild animals up close at last!

Once we had finished dinner and cleaned up, Olivia helped me get settled in Tomás’s room. It looked a lot like Abby’s little brother’s room. Lots of books lined the bookshelves, posters of soccer players decorated the walls, and crayon drawings of rainforest animals were pinned on a bulletin board. On the bed was a pile of stuffed animals, and I noticed one well-worn, goofy-looking monkey that seemed to be the most loved.

“I can sleep on the couch,” I told Olivia as she put fresh sheets on the bed.

“It’s fine,” she assured me. “You’ll be more comfortable here. Tomás will sleep with us.”

The little boy peered at me from behind his mother. His bangs almost touched his eyelashes. Olivia said something to him in Portuguese and he nodded solemnly.

“Bath time,” Olivia explained to me. “He hates the idea of taking a bath —but once he’s in the tub, it’s impossible to get him out!”

After a few minutes, I could hear Tomás singing and splashing around. I sat down at his small desk with my tablet. Even though I was exhausted, I was determined to post a blog about my first day in the Amazon rainforest. I included photos of the grubs, and typed a caption:

It’s not quite as good as St. Louis’s famous gooey butter cake, but this local treat tastes nutty, probably because the larvae—a.k.a. grubs—were nestled in the center of palm nuts. Roasted, they don’t taste half bad! Who knows what else I’ll see—and eat—tomorrow!

After I posted to my blog, I checked my e-mail. There was one from Mom and Dad asking if we had made it safely. This was my first trip apart from them.

Camila had written to me saying she missed me already. I looked at my pink wish bracelet. I had wished that Camila and I would stay friends forever; the legend was that my wish would come true when the bracelet fell off on its

own. I wrote back to tell her I missed her too. *P.S. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that you'll be able to visit St. Louis soon!* I added.

Tomás came back into his room, freshly scrubbed and in his pajamas. Without taking his eyes off me, he gathered some books and picked up his stuffed monkey.

"*Macaco*," Tomás said, holding up the monkey. Then he pointed to himself. "*Meu macaco!*"

I nodded. "Your monkey," I said. "Thank you for lending me your room, Tomás. Obrigada."

He backed out the door. Then he held up Macaco again and said, "Meu!" before turning around and running down the hall.

I tried not to laugh. When I was little, I had a stuffed animal that Ama had brought back for me from Thailand. I named her Ellie the Elephant. Ellie meant the world to me, so I knew how Tomás felt. I still keep Ellie on my desk in my room.

I turned off my tablet and crawled into bed. Just as I was about to lie down, Tomás raced back into the room, grabbed the pillow out from under me, and disappeared.

I hit my head on the headboard, but shook it off and reached for the other pillow. I was exhausted. Not long ago, I had listened to the rhythmic music of the ocean's waves as I drifted off to sleep. Tonight I was serenaded by the quiet of the rainforest, the rustle of the leaves in the breeze, and the murmur of Portuguese as Olivia and Marcos spoke softly to each other in the next room.

Feeling relaxed, I opened Ama's travel journal and began to read. But I only got a few paragraphs in before I fell asleep.

Crazy Chicken

Chapter 5

It seemed like I had just closed my eyes when I awoke to the sounds of Zac and Marcos talking and pans clattering. I quickly got dressed, excited to start my first day of exploring the rainforest.

"*Bom dia!*" Marcos said brightly when I wandered into the kitchen. He was slicing a fresh, juicy pineapple into chunks. Tomás stood on a stool at the counter, carefully placing bread on a plate one slice at a time and making sure it was stacked evenly.

"Bom dia," I responded, rubbing my eyes. I glanced at the clock. 5:00? What!? What was I doing up at five o'clock on my vacation? I yawned. "Why is everybody up so early?" I asked.

"Because Marcos has to give morning tours before it gets too hot outside," Zac shouted over the whirr of the coffee grinder. "And he promised to take us on our tour first."

"Lea, would you mind gathering some eggs from the henhouse for our breakfast?" Olivia asked. She was stirring a pot full of beans on the stove. "Seven or eight should be fine."

I stepped outside and looked for Galo Louco. *Phew,* I thought. *The coast is clear.* The gate was open and a few of the chickens were outside pecking at the ground. Some were brown, others were reddish, and still others were a combination of both colors. I picked up a worn woven basket near the gate and hooked it over the crook of my arm. I walked up the ramp to the henhouse and ducked through the short doorway.

Inside, about a dozen hens sat on their eggs, making low, soothing clucking noises. They didn't seem very interested in me. The first couple of eggs were easy to gather from the unoccupied beds. *This is sort of fun,* I thought. I felt like a farmer. I made a mental note to return later to take pictures for my blog.

As I continued gathering the eggs, I heard a growling sound. I looked down, and facing me was none other than Galo Louco. I averted my eyes and continued gathering eggs. *Three, four, five…*

Suddenly Galo Louco began squawking and pecking at my sandals.

"Shoo! Shoo!" I shouted. Then he squawked louder and started chasing me around the small henhouse. I screamed, dropped the basket, and ran, hitting my head on the doorway on the way out.

When I rushed back into the Barroses' house and told Olivia what had happened, Zac rolled his eyes. "It does no good if you gather eggs but leave them in the henhouse," he told me.

I forced a laugh, but I was embarrassed. It was bad enough that Olivia had to put ice on my forehead where I had hit it, but when she sent little Tomás back to get the eggs, I felt like an idiot.

I quickly forgot my embarrassment when I started eating breakfast. I had never had eggs as fresh or delicious as the ones Olivia fried up.

"Zac," I asked as I reached for seconds, "after Marcos takes us on the river tour this morning, can we go on a hike?"

Zac sopped up some beans with his bread and shoveled it into his mouth. "I'm not sure you're ready," he said.

"Ready? Of course I'm ready!" I said confidently.

"But if you're scared of a little chicken, what will you do if you see an anaconda?" Zac said with his mouth full.

I rolled my eyes. "I've held lots of snakes at the St. Louis Zoo," I reminded him.

"True," Zac mused. "You're the only little kid who ever volunteered. But an Amazon anaconda is one of the biggest snakes in the world. They can grow as long as a bus and weigh over 500 pounds!" His eyes lit up. My brother had always loved snakes. When he was in high school, Zac had an impressive collection of lifelike rubber snakes, and we often heard screams in the house whenever Dad or Mom found one hidden in the towels or under the sheets.

Marcos took a sip of coffee. "Anacondas squeeze their prey to death," he said casually. "But you probably don't need to worry about one chasing you down. In fact, the most dangerous animal in the jungle is not a big one, like

the giant river otter, which can be up to six feet long. Nor the pirarucu fish, which grows up to nine feet long and over 200 pounds. No, the most dangerous animal in the Amazon is actually the tiny mosquito, because it can carry diseases."

I nodded. Now I was glad Mom had made me get shots before traveling, even though I wasn't thrilled at the time.

I looked Zac in the eye. "I'll be fine."

Zac shrugged and gave me a playful wink.

"We had better get going if we want to get a good boat ride in before my first tour," Marcos said. He started gathering the plates.

"You all go ahead," Olivia said. "Tomás and I will clean up."

After I slathered myself with enough sunscreen to create a solar eclipse, I reached for the insect repellent. Zac did an exaggerated cough and waved at the air in front of him as I doused myself with so much bug spray that any insect unfortunate enough to land on me would just slide off.

"There aren't many mosquitos here on the water," Marcos explained as he lifted a tarp off his motorized canoe. The bright red boat was fairly big and could seat up to a dozen people. I noticed that Marcos had painted the name *Tomás* in swirly script on the boat's side.

"Oh, I thought this place would be full of mosquitos," I said. I stepped into the boat carefully and snapped the buckles on my life jacket.

"The acid in the water repels them," Marcos explained. "But if it's mosquitos you're interested in, I'm sure there will be plenty who'd love to meet you when you're hiking through the rainforest!"

I cringed and gave him a weak smile.

Rocky hills and walls of tall green trees and plants rose up on both sides of the river. It was already very hot even though the sun had only just begun to rise. But the wind felt nice as we sped along the river. I loved looking behind us as the canoe cut through the black-blue water, leaving a bubbly white trail in its wake.

Marcos slowed the boat as we entered what looked like a hidden tunnel of plants and branches. It was so beautiful I could hardly contain my excitement. Marcos cut the engine and unhooked the oars from the edge of the boat. I listened to the soft splashes of Marcos's paddle entering the water as he maneuvered the boat through a maze of tangled tree roots. Zac lifted a lantern so that we could see better. The black water reflected the plants and

trees all around us, as if we were gliding over a mirror.

“See these plants?” Zac said, gesturing around us. “Those are actually treetops. The trunks are underwater. When the rainy season ends and the water level lowers, you could walk around the bottom of this river right here.”

“The trees can live like that?” I asked. It was hard to imagine. But then I remembered the tide pools Zac had shown me in Praia Tropical. There, I had been able to walk on the coral and rock, knowing that during high tide, it would all be under the sea.

“Where are all the animals?” I asked, motioning around me.

“Well, there are piranhas right below you,” Zac said.

“Seriously?” I asked, instinctively tucking my feet up off the bottom of the canoe.

“Seriously,” Marcos said. He pulled out a couple of bamboo fishing rods and handed them to me and Zac.

Zac pulled a small plastic bag out of his pocket. “Put this on the hook,” my brother instructed, handing me a small chunk of meat.

I watched Zac bait his hook, and then I did the same.

Then we waited. And waited. Zac got a couple of bites, but when he tried to reel them in, the fish got away. All of a sudden there was a tug on my fishing pole.

“Yank it up!” Zac cried.

“Be careful,” Marcos cautioned, as I stood up. “Yank fast, but in a small movement.”

I wasn’t about to let this fish go. I wanted to catch a fish before my brother did!

“I’ve got it. I’ll be careful,” I assured them…right before I tripped over the cooler.

I accidentally threw my fishing pole up into the air as I splashed headfirst into the Amazon River—filled with man-eating piranhas!

Attack of the Piranhas!

Chapter 6

Panic washed over me. Flailing, I grasped for the edge of the canoe, kicking my legs to ward off any of the vicious piranhas that may have wanted to devour me.

What was that? I shuddered as something skimmed my leg. I screamed and kicked at something wrapped around my big toe.

As I gripped the canoe, I felt Zac's and Marcos's strong arms lifting me into the boat. "It's got me!" I yelled, pointing at my foot. I was afraid to look.

"You're fine!" Zac laughed, and I felt him pull something off my toe. "See?" He held up a clump of river weed.

Gasping, I managed to sputter "thank you" to Zac and Marcos as I tried to catch my breath.

"You okay?" Zac asked as he reached for my flip-flops floating on the river's surface. "I know how much you loved snorkeling, but isn't this a bit much?"

"How can you joke at a time like this?" I cried. "I could have been eaten alive!"

Marcos wrapped a towel around my shoulders. "I'm glad you're okay. But it's actually a myth that piranhas eat humans," he explained as he cast his own fishing line into the water. "In 1913, your president Theodore Roosevelt decided to tour the Amazon. So the local people came up with a plan to

impress him. They caught piranhas, isolated them, and starved them. When Roosevelt arrived, the locals threw a live cow into the water and the piranhas devoured it. Roosevelt wrote about what he saw—and the myth that piranhas are ruthless killers was born."

"You're kidding," I said. So all this time the piranhas' reputation for being man-eaters was an urban legend—or rather, an Amazon legend!

"So much about the rainforest is misunderstood," Zac chimed in. "People want to believe that it's this untouchable place filled with deadly piranhas, and that there are so many trees that the forest is infinite."

I was about to ask Zac what he meant when Marcos tugged on his fishing pole. "Aha!" he yelled. "*This* is a piranha!" He held up a small, squirming fish. He removed it from his fishing hook and held its body with a firm grip so that it couldn't wriggle away. It was dark brown and flat, and I could see its tiny sharp teeth. "Watch," Marcos said. He held up a leaf to the piranha's mouth and it chomped away at it. "It might bite you, but it certainly isn't going to devour you. So the next time you fall into the water, Lea," he said with a wink, "just remember that you don't need to worry about the piranhas." He tossed the little piranha back into the water and turned to me. "It's the caimans, electric eels, and water snakes that you have to watch out for."

When he saw my eyes widen, Marcos added, "As long as you follow the safety rules and respect the wildlife, you'll be safe. Animals won't bite if you leave them alone."

Zac nodded. "Believe me, Lea, the animals' idea of a good time is not to hang out and have humans for supper, but for us to leave them alone. By splashing around in the water like that, you disturbed their habitat."

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open in disbelief. Was he seriously taking the *piranhas'* side?

Marcos started paddling again, past the maze of roots and plants. We emerged from the curtain of leaves, and I shaded my eyes from the bright sunlight that was just beginning to peek over the trees. Once we reached the middle of the river, Marcos started the boat's engine and we zoomed ahead. The warm wind whipped through my still-damp hair like the best blow-dryer in the world. In the distance, I could see the Barroses' yellow house. It looked tiny, like a dollhouse. I was eager to get out of my wet clothes, but sorry that the river cruise was already over.

After I had showered and changed into fresh clothes, I went outside for some time alone. I scanned the yard for Galo Louco, and was glad to see that he was penned up behind the fence. I walked to the dock and waved to Marcos as he motored away to pick up the first of his tour groups. Then I sat

on the edge of the dock for a long time, thinking about how brave I had felt just a few days ago in Praia Tropical. Now I felt like a coward. I had been in the rainforest for less than twenty-four hours and already the two kinds of animals I had come into contact with had scared me—and one was just a dumb chicken! What would I do if I really did come face-to-face with an anaconda—or a jaguar?

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a screen door slamming shut. I looked up to see Tomás bolt out of the house and scramble up a massive, gnarled tree in the yard. Shortly after, Zac came out.

"Tomás, *onde você está?*" he called out. Then he noticed me on the dock. "Lea, have you seen Tomás? We're playing hide-and-go-seek!"

"If I told you, wouldn't that be cheating?" I asked, heading toward him. I glanced at the tree and smiled. The leaves rustled, and I could see one of Tomás's legs among the branches.

Zac looked up. "*Está aí*, Tomás?" he asked. "Are you there?"

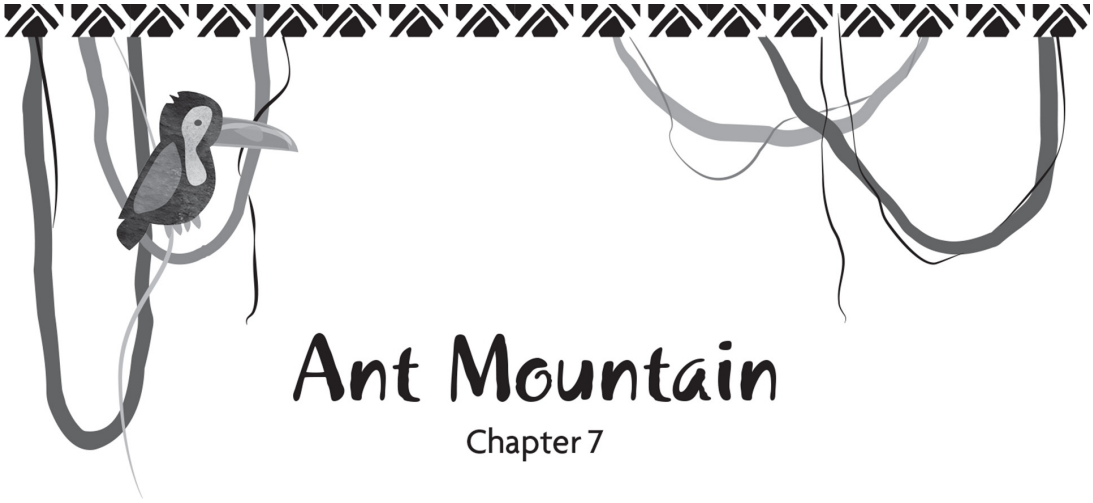
"*Não estou aqui*," Tomás replied.

Zac chuckled. "He says he isn't there."

I laughed along. When I was little, I used to love playing hide-and-go-seek with Zac. Now, here he was halfway across the world playing the same game with his new family.

"Tomás?" Zac called up.

In an instant, Tomás scrambled down the tree and leapt into Zac's arms, laughing. I felt a strange twinge watching the two of them. My brother seemed so comfortable here with Tomás and his host parents. He seemed like he was at home.



Ant Mountain

Chapter 7

After lunch, I opened up my tablet to read my classmates' comments on yesterday's blog post. The first comment was from Dax, the boy who always calls me a scaredy-cat.

> I don't believe you. Are you really in the rainforest? Where are all the wild animals?

That's what I wanted to know! I was determined not only to see some myself, but to photograph them and post the photos to my blog for my classmates to see. I responded with a short blog post about this morning's river cruise:

> The rainforest is unlike any place I have ever seen or even imagined. Even the air is different here—it's humid and smells like a greenhouse. There are walls of plants that tower up and block out the sun. And the Amazon River, well…though it might not have been my plan to go for a swim, I did! I fell in headfirst! I'm lucky the piranhas didn't get me…or the caimans…or the electric eels!

I smiled. *That should satisfy Dax,* I thought. *At least for now.* I logged off

and went into the living room to remind Zac that he had said he'd take me on a hike today.

Tomás wanted to join us, but Olivia made him stay behind so that Zac and I could have some time to ourselves. I was secretly glad that he wasn't tagging along. Tomás was cute, but I couldn't help feeling a little jealous whenever I saw Zac playing with him like he used to do with me. In fact, it seemed like Zac had forgotten that he had a *real* sibling right here in Santa Sofia.

It was almost as if my brother was more interested in being a part of the Barros family than our own family. I wondered what my mom and dad were doing. I'd had lots of sleepovers at Abby's, but I had never been this far away from my parents before. Being fifteen hundred miles apart was a lot different from being three blocks away, and e-mailing was not the same as being in the same room.

Zac had the rest of the year to be with Tomás, but only one week with me. It would be nice, I thought, to have my brother to myself for a while.

As we walked through the rainforest, I was on high alert any time I heard a sound, thinking it might be an animal nearby. I stopped so often that I almost lost sight of Zac a couple of times. *Yikes,* I thought. Getting lost in the rainforest was absolutely the last thing I wanted to do.

The rainforest was dense with tropical trees and plants. At times it was hard to see the dirt path that meandered in and out of hidden passages, through bushes, and under and over fallen tree branches. Zac had no problem climbing over the branches, but one was a struggle for me. I tripped and scraped my knee and cried out with surprise.

Zac was by my side instantly. "You okay, Lea?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm totally fine," I assured him. "Let's keep going!"

"Okay, but keep your voice down or else you'll scare away all the animals."

My eyes lit up, but I contained my excitement. Just to be sure that we couldn't get lost, I kept taking photos of landmarks in case we needed to backtrack, the way I had during our hike in Praia Tropical. I got so busy taking photos that I lost sight of Zac.

Instinctively, I reached for Ama's compass necklace, but instead I touched the seed necklace that Marcos had given me. I took a deep breath. *Don't panic,* I reminded myself. Zac couldn't be far away. I wanted to call for him, but I didn't want to ruin my chances of seeing the animals.

I cupped my hands. “Zac?” I called in a loud whisper. “Where are you?”

Something hit my shoulder. An anaconda? A giant spider? I flinched and spun around.

Zac was standing behind me. “Man, you’re jumpy,” he whispered. “What’s the matter?”

“Um, nothing,” I said, shaking off my nerves. *Come on, Lea,* I told myself. *Get it together.* “I was hoping that we’d see more wild animals,” I said as I followed Zac through a dense wall of vines. “I mean, besides the piranhas we saw this morning.”

“If you pay attention, you’ll find that they’re all around us,” Zac said.

I raised my camera, but I didn’t see any movement amidst the leaves. Zac must have been mistaken—or maybe I was. I had thought that the rainforest would be filled with animals, sort of like the St. Louis Zoo, only here the animals could roam freely.

Zac sensed my disappointment. “I’ll see if Marcos can take us on a night cruise along the river after dinner,” he promised. “The rainforest really comes alive with wildlife at night!”

“But won’t it be hard to see?” I asked.

“Not if you use *all* of your senses,” Zac said mysteriously.

I wondered what he meant. I mean, if I couldn’t see, then how would I know that the animals were there—and how would I get any pictures? I had told my friends that I was going to see lots of wildlife, and that I’d take photos. But how could I do that if the animals didn’t show up? Or if they did, but I couldn’t see them?

I swatted the bugs that buzzed in my ear and was glad that I had put on a triple layer of insect spray.

“We’re making too much noise,” Zac said. “The wildlife can hear you coming, especially when you’re on foot, and they warn the others. Listen.” I cocked my head and heard deep hoots in the distance. “That’s the sound of monkeys warning one another that there are humans nearby,” he said.

Zac pointed up. Above us a pair of monkeys leaped from tree to tree. I raised my camera and took a burst of shots as the monkeys disappeared into the canopy.

Finally! I couldn’t wait to post this on my blog. But when I scrolled through the photos, all I saw were trees. The monkeys had been too fast, or I had been too slow. I still had nothing to show my classmates.

We stopped so that I could take a drink of water. I was about to sit on a log when I spotted a line of black ants marching across it. That was a close call! I focused my lens and began snapping pictures, following the ants down

the log, up a tree, and…I gasped. If I hadn't seen it through my lens I would have thought it was a mountain of dirt, but up close I could see hundreds—no, thousands…maybe millions!—of ants. The mountain of ants was about as tall as Tomás. This was something to blog about!

Buoyed by my find, I grabbed a stick and handed it to Zac. "You know what would be cool?" I asked, breathless with excitement. "Take this stick and poke the anthill. And when the ants start to go crazy, I'll shoot a video for my blog!" The video would be epic and amazing! Even Dax would be impressed. I raised my camera. "Go ahead, I'm ready," I called to Zac. "Action!"

Zac didn't move. He just stood there with the stick dangling at his side. Maybe he didn't hear me.

"Go for it," I said again. "Any time now."

Through the lens I saw Zac drop the stick and advance toward me. He looked angry.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Why didn't you poke them?"

"I'm really disappointed in you, Lea," he said sternly, and pushed past me.

What did I do now? I wondered as I watched him walk away.

"I don't get it," I called after him. "They're just ants, Zac!"

He shook his head and stopped to look at me. "*Just ants?* We don't bash an anthill for entertainment. We don't destroy their habitat for a video so you can show off to your friends back home. What were you thinking?"

My face flushed red. I didn't know what to say. I hadn't thought about that.

"Those ants are just going about their own business," he went on. "For us to bother them, to disturb them, is wrong. Not only is it inconsiderate, but they'll think you're attacking them and fight back. Get all of them riled up, and you could have some serious ant bites. And if they were bullet ants—which, thankfully, they are not—one bite could paralyze you—or me!"

"I—I didn't think—" I sputtered.

"Clearly," Zac said, shaking his head.

He turned to head back to the Barroses' house and I followed, embarrassed and ashamed. I had just thought it would make a good video. But I had let Zac down. I had let the rainforest down. I had let myself down.

When we got back to the house, Zac went inside without a word.

I wandered down to the dock and dangled my feet in the water, feeling alone and naive and totally out of my element. A couple of small boats passed, and when the passengers waved, I waved back, grateful for the friendly gesture. But clearly, I didn't belong here.

After a while, I headed back toward the house. I'd e-mail Abby and Camila, I decided, and maybe even try to video-chat with Mom and Dad. That would make me feel better.

But as I neared the front door I heard a familiar crowing sound. *Great.* Galo Louco was heading toward me, blocking my way to the house. Not knowing what else to do, I scrambled up the gnarled tree that Tomás had used as a hiding place.

Urrgg! I am such a totally clueless city girl, I thought as I straddled a low, sturdy branch. *Enemy to the ants, scared of a chicken.* I felt homesick. And embarrassed that I had bragged to my class about all the wild animals I was going to see—and ashamed that my bragging had driven me to consider destroying the ants' home. A few tears streamed down my cheeks, and I didn't bother to wipe them away. It felt good to cry, and I was glad no one was around to see my pity party.

After a few minutes, I thought I heard someone say my name. I looked down, but no one was there. All I saw was Galo Louco strutting around the tree trunk—and he wasn't talking.

"Lea," the voice said again.

I looked up.

Tomás waved at me shyly from his perch on a higher branch. He wore a crown made from the leaves of a palm frond. He climbed down to a branch near mine and looked at me with curiosity.

"*Por que você está chorando?*" he asked, running his fingers down his cheeks to signal tears.

I pointed to the chicken and shrugged, wiping the tears from my face. I was certain he was going to laugh at me. But instead, Tomás pulled a piece of fruit out of his pocket. He threw it past Galo Louco, who went running after it.

Then Tomás took the crown off his head and handed it to me.

"Obrigada," I said, feeling better.

"*De nada*," he said.

I put the crown on my head, and when Tomás smiled, so did I.

Night Cruise

Chapter 8

As the day wore on, I still felt awkward around my brother. I was so ashamed of my behavior with the ants that I couldn't even look at him. At dinner, we didn't say much to each other. Olivia and Marcos were busy chatting and didn't seem to notice. But Tomás sat between us and kept glancing back and forth at Zac and me.

"So, Lea," Marcos said, pushing away from the table, "Zac mentioned you might be up for a night cruise on the river?"

I looked up from my plate where I had been poking at my food, and smiled. "Yes!" I glanced at Zac, but he didn't take his eyes off his meal. I was glad that he had kept his promise and asked Marcos to take us out on the boat.

Even though I could hardly wait to get back on the river, I did my best not to rush through the rest of my meal. After we packed away the leftovers and cleaned the dishes, we went out to the dock.

In the canoe, I sat up front near Marcos while my brother sat with Olivia and Tomás toward the rear, leaving several rows of seats between us. After cruising along at a high speed, Marcos cut the motor and let the canoe drift silently. It was eerie and beautiful at the same time. The bright moon reminded me of the night in Praia Tropical when we watched the baby turtles hatching from their shells and making their way toward the welcoming waves of the ocean. I wondered how the hatchlings were doing and how many had made it to safety.

Tomás started singing quietly. "*Brilha, brilha, estrelinha*…" I recognized

the tune and realized that he was singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” in Portuguese. After a while, Tomás finished his song and we were silent again. Marcos used an oar to slow the boat and let the current carry us.

“I don’t see any animals,” I whispered to Marcos.

I could see Marcos’s smile in the moonlight. “To know the rainforest is not just to see it, but to hear it,” he whispered. “Close your eyes,” he instructed. I did as I was told. “Now listen. Listen. Listen.”

I expected to hear the hoots of monkeys that I had heard in the forest earlier that day. But instead I just heard a constant high-pitched, pulsing hum.

“What is that buzzing sound?”

“Those are millions of cicadas,” Marcos replied. “Keep listening. Try to listen *deeper*.”

Listen *deeper*? What did he mean? I closed my eyes tight and I tried hard to listen. I wanted to hear what he was talking about so badly.

“Relax, Lea,” Marcos said softly. “This is not a test. Just relax and listen.”

I hadn’t realized that my shoulders had tensed. I exhaled—and that’s when I began to hear it. Softly at first, then more clearly through the droning cicadas: a glorious symphony of sounds wafting through the warm Amazon air. Tree frogs, night birds, the splashes of animals entering the water. As the wildlife conversation rose all around us, Marcos taught me to isolate each animal’s unique sound. The hoots and squawks of owls, the creaking croak of tree frogs, the flutter of wings, and caimans splashing in the water. How could I have missed all this before? It was beautiful, and even though I was in the canoe with others, I felt as if the wildlife were serenading me alone.

I looked at Zac, wanting to tell him how much I loved this. But I knew we were supposed to stay quiet.

“It is so hot in the rainforest that most animals sleep during the day,” Marcos explained in a low voice. “When it cools off at night, that’s when they come out.”

He picked up a flashlight and turned it on. I was surprised by the strong beam of red light. “A regular flashlight would disturb the animals, but this red light lets us see them without bothering them.”

He swept the powerful light along the shore. I could see lots of small flashes of red in the trees above us and on the riverbank just a few yards away.

“What are those flashes?” I asked.

“Animals’ eyes, reflecting the red light,” he explained.

I sat up, alert. The animals were so close!

Marcos trained the light far up into a tree. I could see four sets of glowing red eyes. I strained to get a better look.

"It's a family of sloths," he said.

My breath caught in my chest. There they were, their lanky arms clutching the tree branches. Sloths! I longed to see them up close.

We continued down the river, and Marcos slowed the canoe. "This is a favorite spot for caimans," he whispered. "Like most animals, they have very sharp hearing. If we make any sudden noises, they'll swim away. We aren't nearly as interesting to them as they are to us."

With the canoe drifting near shore, Marcos swept the area with his flashlight. Dozens of small red lights lit up, some in the water, some on land. Caimans! My heart leapt with joy—and a little fear. "How sturdy is the canoe?" I whispered, my voice unsteady.

Marcos let out a low chuckle. "Very sturdy," he said. "We're not going to tip over, Lea. I promise."

Marcos paddled toward shore where the caimans had been, and we heard splashes.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked.

Marcos nodded. "They're long gone," he said, positioning the canoe against a tangle of trees and brush. He took out a long metal stick with a hook on the end and reached it into the leaves. Suddenly he turned and looked at me. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"For what?" I said.

He pulled the pole out of the tree to reveal…an anaconda! It was huge. I mean, HUGE. I slapped my hands over my mouth to stifle a scream.

"Don't worry," Marcos assured me. "I won't let him near you. But while I have him here, do you want to take a picture?"

A picture. Yes, a picture. Trembling, I reached for my camera.

"Don't use the flash," Zac called out in a loud whisper. "There's enough light from the moon."

I got my shots, enough to satisfy Dax, and put my camera down. Marcos released the snake into the water and it slithered away.

As we canoed back to the house, my heart felt a bit lighter. Zac and Marcos were right. The animals had been there the entire time. I just had to be patient.

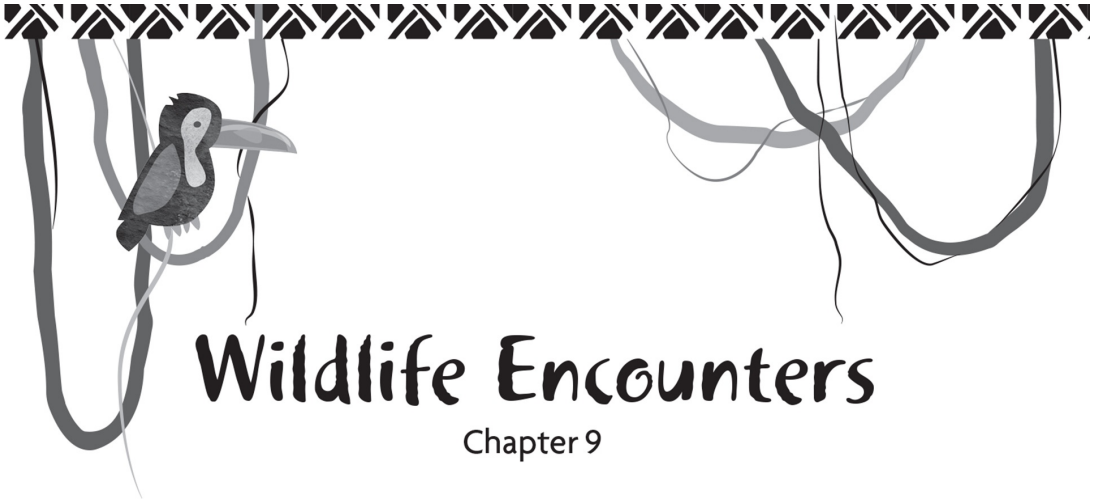
I moved to one of the middle seats in the canoe and motioned for Zac to join me.

I exhaled. "About this afternoon," I began.

"Later," Zac said. "Let's just enjoy this moment." He put his arm around

me. It felt right.

We were both quiet for the longest time, looking at the stars, listening to the wildlife. But then I felt two little hands pushing us apart and Tomás sat down between us. He smiled up at me, and then turned his grin on Zac. Then the three of us broke into a laugh that echoed across the river.



Wildlife Encounters

Chapter 9

The next morning, I awoke to a gentle pitter-patter sound. I stretched out my arms as I yawned. Then my eyes flew open and I rushed to the window. It was raining. Did that mean that Zac and I couldn't go on another rainforest hike today?

Once I was dressed, I went into the kitchen and found everybody doing their daily morning chores. Zac was setting the table, Olivia was cooking, Marcos sliced the fresh fruit, and Tomás helped carry the food to the table. I assumed that I was expected to help, too. I wouldn't have minded—after all, I had lots of chores at home, like doing the dishes, raking the leaves in the fall, and helping shovel snow in the winter—but those chores weren't fraught with danger. Leaving the kitchen, I took a deep breath to prepare myself for another Galo Louco attack. I was about to head outside to the henhouse when Tomás came through the front door, his hair dripping wet with rain, and handed me a basket full of eggs.

"Obrigada!" I exclaimed.

Tomás gave me a shy smile, and we walked into the kitchen together.

When we had finished setting the table, Olivia told us it would be a few more minutes until breakfast. "You two relax for a bit," she told us. "I'll let you know when breakfast is ready."

I followed Zac into the living room and we sat next to each other on the couch.

"Zac, I am so sorry about what happened with the ants yesterday," I

blurted, wanting to get it off my chest. “I was careless and selfish and, well… you were right. I was thinking more about getting a great video than how that would affect the ants and their habitat.”

Zac looked at me. “And I shouldn’t have gotten so mad at you,” he confessed. “It’s just that I care about the wildlife in the rainforest and I’d do anything to protect it.” He sighed. “I just wish I could do more—and I still have a lot to learn.”

“Me too,” I said.

Zac put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a squeeze. “I’ll tell you what, Lea. When the rain lets up, let’s take the rowboat out on the water. I know a place down the river where a bunch of monkey families hang out. I bet you could get some great photos for your blog there.”

“I’d like that,” I said. I looked out the window. If only there were an off switch for the rain!

But the rain kept pouring, well past lunch. While Tomás and Macaco, his stuffed monkey, watched the rainfall from his bedroom window, I opened Ama’s travel journal. I’d hardly had a chance to read it since I arrived in the rainforest.

Not long after her trip to Alaska, Ama went to Tanzania, where she visited an animal rescue center:

It was love at first sight when I saw Georgie, a skinny young giraffe with a cast on his long leg. I was told that he had been injured while fleeing a lion attack. Georgie’s mother hadn’t survived the attack, so he had been orphaned.

We bonded quickly, and he followed me everywhere. I wanted so badly to take Georgie home, but I knew that was impossible. Imagine, a giraffe in my tiny house! But I hated the thought of leaving him behind. I wanted to do what I could to help him survive and thrive on the savanna. That’s when I decided to adopt him! Well, not in the literal sense of the word. But I made a plan to donate some money to help pay for his food and medical bills.

It was hard to say good-bye to Georgie, but knowing that he was in good hands was a comfort. And knowing that I had made a new friend—one

with very long legs!—warmed my heart.

I closed Ama's journal and felt a rush of impatience. I couldn't wait to get back outside to see some more animals.

I sat at the small table next to Tomás's bed and worked on a blog post about my hike in the rainforest and the night cruise. I was pleased that Zac was in the background of the photo of the ant mountain so that my friends could get an idea of how big it really was.

The minute I posted my blog, comments and questions about the rainforest started pouring in from my classmates. (There was only a one-hour time difference between here and St. Louis, I realized, which meant that it was library hour.) Even Dax was impressed by my photos of the ant mountain—and especially the anaconda.

Then I moved on to my e-mails. I was excited to hear from Camila, who told me that her family was planning a trip to Chicago in April.

Quickly, I wrote back. *The drive from Chicago to St. Louis isn't very far! And I'll be on spring break for a week in April! Fingers crossed that you can visit me then!!!*

I e-mailed Mom and Dad to be sure that Camila was invited, and Mom got right back and assured me that she was. She also reported that my father was going a little stir-crazy from not being able to go anywhere because of his broken leg—but that she was surfing up a storm.

Tomás brought out a big bin of crayons and some paper and sat next to me, propping up Macaco in his own chair. I watched as Tomás began to draw the river and the trees along the banks. Then he drew an outline of a dolphin under the water. As he rooted around his bin, I spotted a gray crayon and handed it to him. He shook his head, instead reaching for a pink one.

What an imagination! I thought as he colored the dolphin pink. Next he drew a kitten—or maybe it was a leopard since it had spots. I chose some brightly colored crayons and handed them to Tomás, thinking that a purple-and-green leopard would go well with his pink dolphin, but instead he reached for yellow and brown and black.

Olivia appeared in the doorway. She squatted down next to the table to look at Tomás's drawing. "*Bom trabalho!* Good job, Tomás." She turned to me. "He sure loves margays."

What's a margay? I wondered.

I typed "margay" into my web browser and there was the animal Tomás was drawing, right on my screen! It looked like a leopard, but smaller, with little rounded ears and huge brown eyes.

Tomás looked over my shoulder at the margays on the screen. He

pointed to one and then to his picture.

"It's the same," I said, nodding. "Margay!"

Just then, Zac popped into the room and said in a fake stern voice, "Lea! What are you doing sitting around when you could be cruising down the Amazon River?"

I looked outside. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining!

The rain left a clean fresh scent in the air. Zac led me to a small, faded green rowboat on the other side of the dock from where Marcos kept his big canoe tied up. The rowboat looked as if it could barely float. When I boarded, it rocked back and forth, and I quickly sat down so as not to go for another unscheduled swim.

Zac was an expert with the oars, and soon we were skimming along the river, flanked on either side by lush forests. The trees were still dripping and steaming, the leaves shiny and sparkling from all the rain. Brightly colored parrots flew overhead and perched high in the tree branches. I took out my camera, zoomed in, and got some great photos.

"Look!" Zac said. He pointed to the water just a few feet away.

I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real. It took my breath away.

"A dolphin!" I cried. But it wasn't just any dolphin—it was a *bubblegum pink* dolphin, just like the one Tomás had drawn!

"That's a *boto*, a freshwater dolphin," Zac said as he slowed the rowboat. "When the water level is low, you'll see more of them around here."

The boto glided in and out of the water. I glimpsed a second, smaller flash of pink beside her.

"Look!" I exclaimed. "There are two of them. Is that her baby?"

Zac grinned and nodded. I took some photos, and then began to record a video. My heart fluttered at the sight of the two of them together.

"What's she doing?" I asked as the mother boto nudged her baby.

"She's teaching her calf to come up for air as he swims," Zac said.

"Her *calf*? Zac—it's a baby boto, not a baby cow!"

Zac smiled. "That's what baby dolphins and botos are called. Calves."

The botos swam beside us as we glided down the river. Before long, Zac started steering us toward the shore, and the botos continued on their way.

The bottom of the boat dragged along the shallow riverbed, and we came to a gentle stop. Zac hopped out, tugged the boat onto the shore, and gave me

his hand to help me up. After just a few steps, we found ourselves in the dense greenery of the rainforest.

The leaves stirred above me, and I was able to get several photos of monkeys swinging through the branches. I got one great shot of a monkey in midair as he leapt from tree to tree.

We ducked under a low branch, and I spotted a giant spider on it. At home, I normally screamed when I saw spiders. This time, I took photos of it instead.

As we walked, I thought about the questions my classmates had asked on my blog. I had been getting a great response to each post, but since Ms. Swain had offered extra credit to anyone who asked me a question about Brazil that I answered, my inbox was flooded.

I read that a lot of rainforest animals are endangered, Abby had written. *What is causing them to die out?*

I wasn't sure, so I asked Zac.

"The animals here face many threats, but one big problem is poachers," Zac said matter-of-factly.

Poachers? Didn't poaching have something to do with eggs? "What are poachers?" I asked.

"People who kidnap animals and sell them as pets. Every year, the rainforest loses over ten million animals to poachers."

"Ten million?" I exclaimed. "That's awful."

"Deforestation is also a problem," he continued. "Cattle ranchers and farmers clear the land for their farms, and loggers cut down trees to sell the wood—trees that were once the homes of many animals. Imagine if someone came to St. Louis and began to destroy all the homes in Lafayette Square. What would we do? Where would we live?"

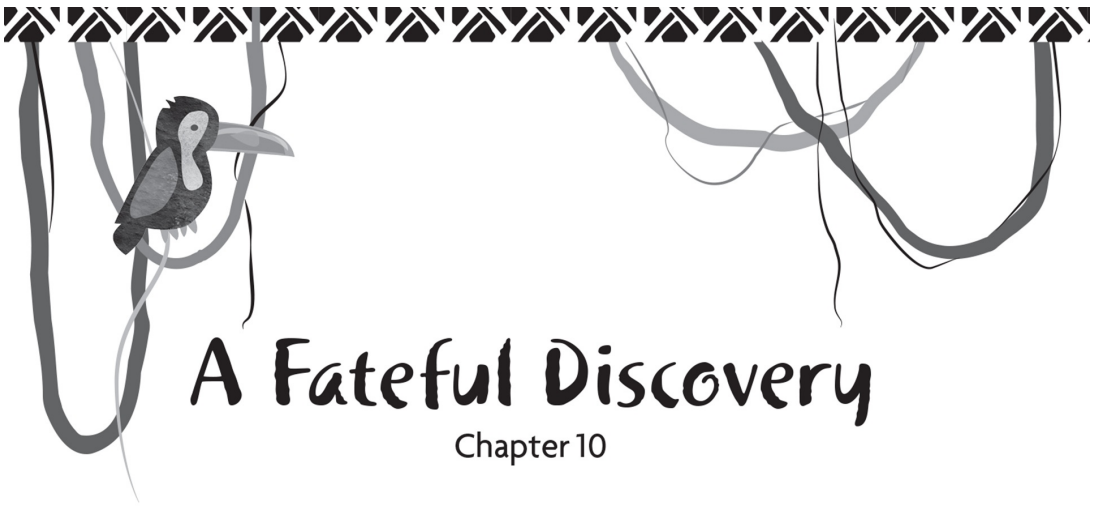
I shrugged and shook my head, feeling helpless and horrified. *Where would the animals go if the trees weren't here?* My heart ached when I thought about all the animals that had been kidnapped and sold away by poachers, and the poor birds, monkeys, and even spiders and insects that had lost their homes in the trees.

We continued to walk in silence. After a while, we came into a small clearing. Zac went to inspect a large millipede that was squirming up a tree trunk. I kept my distance, but zoomed in my camera lens for a good shot. Then I panned around us, taking photos of the lush rainforest. The forest floor was covered with leaves, and when I looked closely I could see armies of ants and other insects scurrying every which way. Then I spotted something strange on my camera screen. Slowly I lowered the camera. On the ground ahead of me was a small pile of matted fur in the leaves. At first I thought it

was a stuffed animal or—my breath caught—a dead one. But then I saw that it was breathing. As I approached, I could see that it was moving one of its arms very slowly. It had long black-and-white fur, and was curled up in the leaves—

I gasped.

"Zac!" I called out. "Zac, it's a baby sloth!"



A Fateful Discovery

Chapter 10

Cautiously, I walked around the little sloth. It hardly moved, but then sloths are known to be slow-moving. Still, there was a knot in my stomach, and I had a feeling that something was wrong. Why was it all alone? Had it fallen out of the tree? Was it hurt?

Zac ran over to me. We both bent down. The sloth let go of a heartbreaking sound that I will never forget. It was a weak bleating noise, like a baby goat.

"It's very young," he said.

"We have to help it!" I pleaded.

Zac stood up. "Lea, you stay with the sloth. I'll scout around. Mothers rarely stray far away from their babies. Don't touch it, though. We don't want to get our scent on it."

As I stood guard over the sloth, I bent down and spoke softly to it. "Everything's going to be okay. I'm right here with you."

The little sloth lay on its stomach at the base of a tall tree. It was the sweetest thing I had ever seen. Brown fur framed its friendly white face and dark eyes, and it had a tiny black nose. And even though its mouth was turned up in a smile, the frightened look in its eyes told me it wasn't happy. Its breathing seemed shallow, and although it tried, it was too weak to crawl away. It smelled sort of bad, but I stayed close. Nothing could keep me away from this baby sloth.

Soon my brother returned. He looked distressed.

“Did you find the mother?” I asked.

Zac shook his head. “No sign of her,” he reported. He ran his hand through his mop of brown hair.

“What does that mean?” I asked. I thought of the boto mother who took such good care of her calf. Where was this sloth’s mother?

“Most likely, the baby lost its grip on its mother and she wasn’t able to rescue her baby. Or something bad may have happened to the mother. Maybe a predator attacked her or a poacher took her.”

Worry set in. I looked down at the helpless baby sloth. “So what else can we do? We have to save it, Zac!”

He released a big sigh. “Okay, let me see if I can get it to latch on to the tree. It’ll be safer there.”

I nodded.

Gently, Zac picked up the baby sloth. I followed and took photos as he tried to get the sloth to latch. Slowly, instinctively, the creature reached out and tried to wrap its weak arms around the branch. It trembled and let out another cry. But as hard as it tried, it couldn’t hold on to the branch.

Zac gathered the baby close to him and it clung to his shoulder as he inspected one of its front paws. “Come here,” he said. “Look.”

I peered at the baby’s small paws, which had long toes, or fingers, almost like hands. A couple of its claws were broken off.

“This is a three-toed sloth,” Zac explained. “I think its broken claws are part of the reason that it can’t latch on.”

“Will the sloth be able to live on its own out here?” I asked. “It’ll be okay, right?”

“I’m afraid it’s too little to fend off predators and too weak to search for food. The missing claws will make it impossible to climb, and at this age, it has no sense of direction, so it’s easy prey.”

“Maybe we could bring it back to the Barroses’ house,” I suggested. “We’ll nurse it back to health, and then I can adopt it!” I knew a thing or two about taking care of animals in need. I always helped whenever Abby’s family took in rescue animals from the local shelter. And last year at school I found a baby sparrow that had fallen from a nest. We fed him by hand, and he became our class bird. We named him Tweety. Maybe we could have a class sloth, too!

“I’m sorry, Lea. That’s just not possible. Besides, it would be illegal for you to take a sloth out of the rainforest,” Zac said, bringing me back to reality with a thud.

I bit my lip. “Then maybe Olivia and Marcos will be able to take care of it.”

Zac shook his head. “To nurse this baby back to health would be a full-time job. They already have their hands full with Tomás and their jobs.”

“Well, I could do it!” I volunteered.

“Lea, you leave in three days.”

“What about you?” I said, scrambling for solutions. “You’ve got another half a year here.”

“Yes, but I have my research and studies, which will start up again next week,” Zac reminded me. “Besides, I’m not trained in wildlife rescue or rehabilitation. Caring for a wild animal, especially one this young, is very difficult.”

“But—” I started. But *what?* I knew he was right. My voice trembled. “May I hold it?”

When Zac put the baby in my arms, my body flooded with love for it. Was this how mothers felt when they cuddled their babies? The sloth clung to me, resting its tiny head on my shoulder. It weighed almost nothing. How could I leave this little baby sloth to die alone in the rainforest? I began to sob. I felt so helpless.

Zac looked miserable. “I know this hurts,” he said gently. “Mother Nature can be cruel. I’m so sorry, Lea. But this sort of thing happens a thousand times a day in the rainforest.”

“But it doesn’t happen a thousand times a day to *this* baby,” I blubbered. “Maybe I can’t stop the poachers or bring the trees back on my own. But Zac, I want to save this baby. You said you wanted to give back to the rainforest. Well, here’s your chance to help—one animal at a time.”

By the way he set his jaw, I could tell that Zac was thinking hard about what I had said. He let out a deep sigh, and then his eyes lit up. “I have a professor who specializes in wildlife rehabilitation. I don’t have her phone number, but I can e-mail her and see if she has any recommendations. But I can’t make any promises, okay?”

I nodded, then got teary again, this time with happiness. Maybe there was hope for this baby sloth after all.

Tomás was up in his tree when Zac and I returned to the Barroses’ house with the little sloth. He quickly scrambled down and looked curiously at the creature sleeping in my arms.

“Mãe!” he called, and ran inside to get his mother.

Olivia rushed out and inspected the baby sloth. “Poor girl. She’s probably dehydrated and hungry,” she said. She turned to Zac. “Take the canoe down the river to the third house. You know, the blue one with the red trim on the windows. They have goats. We’ll need some goat’s milk right away.”

As she said this, I realized how little I knew about taking care of a sick sloth. Sure, I had helped nurse Tweety back to health. And I have been taking care of my turtle Ginger for the past five years. But she lives in a glass aquarium with a water filter and lights, and I can buy her food at the pet store just down the street. I had no idea what to do to help an injured baby sloth.

I held the baby closer, careful not to squeeze her too tight, and gently stroked her fur. Tomás stood quietly by my side, and then started to sing a slow song in Portuguese that sounded like a lullaby. He leaned over to nuzzle the sloth’s soft head, but stopped. He pointed to the baby and held his nose. I had grown used to her smell by now and didn’t mind it.

In a little while, Zac returned with the goat’s milk. Olivia found an eyedropper and filled it with milk. I tried to give the sloth to Zac to feed her, but she wouldn’t let go of me. So I held on to her as Zac brought the eyedropper to her mouth. She eagerly took the goat’s milk, and my heart soared.

I thought of the times when Mom or Ama had said to me, “Eat! You should eat more!” And now, here I was, thinking the same thing.

Almost immediately after eating, the sloth fell asleep. I sat on the couch, not wanting to awaken her.

Zac sat down next to me. “I e-mailed my professor,” he said.

“What did she say?” I asked.

Zac shook his head. “Haven’t heard back yet. We’ve done all we can for now. The next step is to wait.”

I had no idea waiting could be so hard.

Marcos found an empty wooden fruit crate, and I asked Tomás to hold the sloth while I went outside to gather some leaves to cushion the bottom of the crate.

Once the sloth’s bed was ready, I joined Olivia, Marcos, and Zac in the living room, where Tomás was still cradling the baby. I smiled and took some pictures. Suddenly, Ama popped into my mind. How I would have loved to share a moment like this with her! I missed my grandmother so much just then. I would have given anything to hug her and to tell her about the baby sloth that we had found in the rainforest.

This little baby was all alone in the world. That's when I decided that I'd give her a name. *But what name would be worthy of this brave little girl?* I asked myself. Then it hit me.

"I think we should name her Amanda," I announced.

Zac smiled at me. "After Ama," he said, nodding. He turned to Tomás and translated into Portuguese.

Tomás smiled. "Amanda," he said, then whispered the name in her ear.

That night, I couldn't wait to blog about Amanda. My classmates would be so excited to hear about how I had found her in the rainforest, and I knew that once they saw the photos they would fall in love with Amanda, too.

Tomás sat nearby, cradling the baby sloth as I wrote:

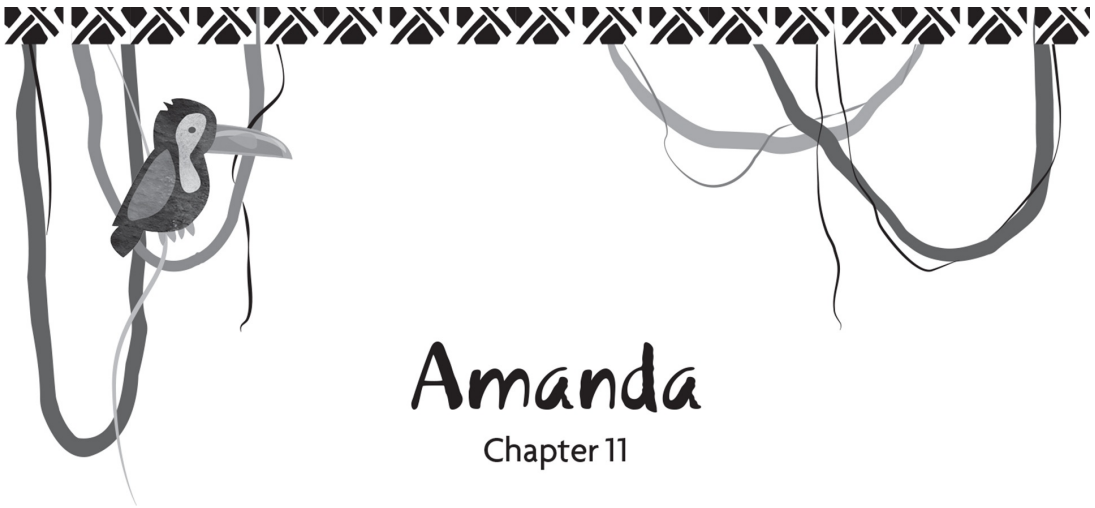
> Today we found a baby sloth. She's injured and in poor shape. Sloths, especially babies, are always in danger because they move so slowly. We were lucky to find this little one on the ground before a predator did. Although, sometimes other animals don't even notice sloths because they are so still! Sloths eat and sleep and even give birth hanging upside down from tree branches. But Amanda is missing some claws and has trouble gripping. I can only hope that we can find her the help she needs to gain her strength back and learn how to survive in the wild.

When I was done writing, it was time for bed. I gently placed Amanda in her bed. Tomás looked on and furrowed his brow.

"*O que?*" I asked him. "What is it, Tomás?"

He held up his hand for me to wait and then ran down the hall. When he returned, Macaco was in his arms. He gave his stuffed monkey a big hug, and then gently placed him in the crate next to Amanda. With great effort she wrapped herself around Macaco and snuggled up to him.

My heart nearly burst with love. I gave Tomás two thumbs-up and he returned the gesture. Then together we watched over Amanda until she fell asleep.



Amanda

Chapter 11

I dreamed that I was hiking in the rainforest with Zac. Amanda was on the ground, helpless and crying, but I walked right past her and kept going. When I realized what I had done, I turned around. But she was gone…

I awoke in a sweat. It was still dark outside. I immediately went to check on Amanda in her crate, but she wasn't there. I panicked for a moment—had she escaped? Had somebody taken her? Then I saw the light on in the kitchen.

"Lea, bom dia," Marcos said, looking up at me. He was sitting at the dining room table cradling the baby sloth in one arm and feeding her from the dropper.

I felt my body relax as my breathing slowed down. *Phew!* Amanda was safe.

"Babies need to eat often," Marcos explained as he dipped the dropper into a glass of goat's milk. "Their stomachs are small, so they need to eat lots of little meals."

I nodded, recalling that when Abby's little brother was a baby, it seemed like he was being fed all the time.

Marcos shifted and handed Amanda to me. "Why don't you finish feeding her?" he said. "I've got to get ready for a daybreak river tour."

I took Amanda, who looked drowsy. It felt great to hold her again. "Isn't it awfully early for a tour?" I asked him.

"The sunrise over the Amazon River is a sight unlike any other," Marcos

said, after taking a long sip of coffee. “It’s worth getting up extra early for. I’ll take you before you leave,” he promised.

Before I leave…

In a few days my parents would fly to Manaus to meet me, and then together we’d travel back home to Lafayette Square, my neighborhood in St. Louis. I thought back to when I had first arrived in the Amazon, when I felt out of place and homesick. I looked down at Amanda, who was sleeping soundly. Now I couldn’t imagine leaving the rainforest. I couldn’t imagine leaving Amanda behind.

After Marcos left, I got out my tablet and logged on to my blog while Amanda napped nearby in her crate. I wanted to stay as close to her as possible. Even though she had been drinking the goat milk, she seemed to be getting weaker, and this worried me.

I had a lot of comments on my blog. As I scrolled through the posts, I smiled. Everyone loved the botos, although a couple of the boys accused me of photoshopping the picture to turn the river dolphins pink. And most of my classmates had commented about Amanda. It seemed that they were as smitten with her as I was.

JESSA: She’s so cute!

MS. SWAIN: How lucky that you found her!

EMILIA: Oooh, I want a sloth as a pet!

LUCA: Is her fur soft or prickly?

DAX: Cool! You should bring her home to St. Louis.

JAYDEN: Is Amanda going to live???

Then I read this:

ABBY: Really, Lea? I can’t believe you took that sloth out of her natural habitat!

I gasped. Of everyone in my class, I thought Abby would have been the happiest with what I had done! Suddenly it felt like a weight had been dropped on me. I couldn’t believe that Abby had accused me of doing something wrong. Amanda needed our help—couldn’t Abby see that?

I bent over Amanda’s crate to check on her. She was even more lethargic than just fifteen minutes ago when I had finished feeding her. She looked up at me and let out a weak cry.

I gathered Amanda in my arms and ran into Zac’s room. “Zac? Zac!” I

said, rousting him awake. “I think Amanda’s getting worse. Can you check to see if your professor has gotten back to you yet?”

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Without a word, he logged on to his laptop. “Nothing yet,” he reported. “But it’s only 6 a.m. She’s probably still asleep. We need to be patient.”

“But Zac,” I cried, “I’m not sure how much longer she’ll last without help. I’m so scared.”

He peered at Amanda and sighed. “I’m worried about her, too.”

As we sat down to breakfast, I put the crate between Tomás and me. Amanda slept next to Macaco, too weak to hug him. Olivia brought out freshly baked cheese rolls, but Tomás, Zac, and I didn’t have much of an appetite. We ate quietly, spending more time watching the baby sloth than eating our meals. Zac kept his laptop on the table so that he would know right away when his professor responded to his e-mail.

When his computer pinged, everyone turned and looked at it. Zac set down his glass of papaya juice and immediately checked his e-mail.

“Good news,” Zac finally said, beaming. “Professor Da Rocha says there’s a wildlife sanctuary about an hour from here. They specialize in wild animal rescue and rehabilitation.”

“So they’ll take Amanda?” I asked hopefully.

“I’m not sure if they’ll have enough room or resources,” Zac said. “But I’ll call them right away.” He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed the number on his screen.

As Zac spoke to the sanctuary worker, he nodded solemnly and kept glancing at Amanda. At one point he held up her claws and examined them, speaking rapidly in Portuguese.

I held my breath. This could be Amanda’s only chance for survival. What would happen if the sanctuary wouldn’t take her?

“Obrigado,” Zac said and hung up the call.

“Well?” I asked.

“They said to bring her in. She’ll get an exam, and then they’ll decide if they can help her.” Zac turned to Olivia. “May I take the truck?”

Olivia nodded. “They’ll know what’s best for Amanda,” she said with a warm look at me.

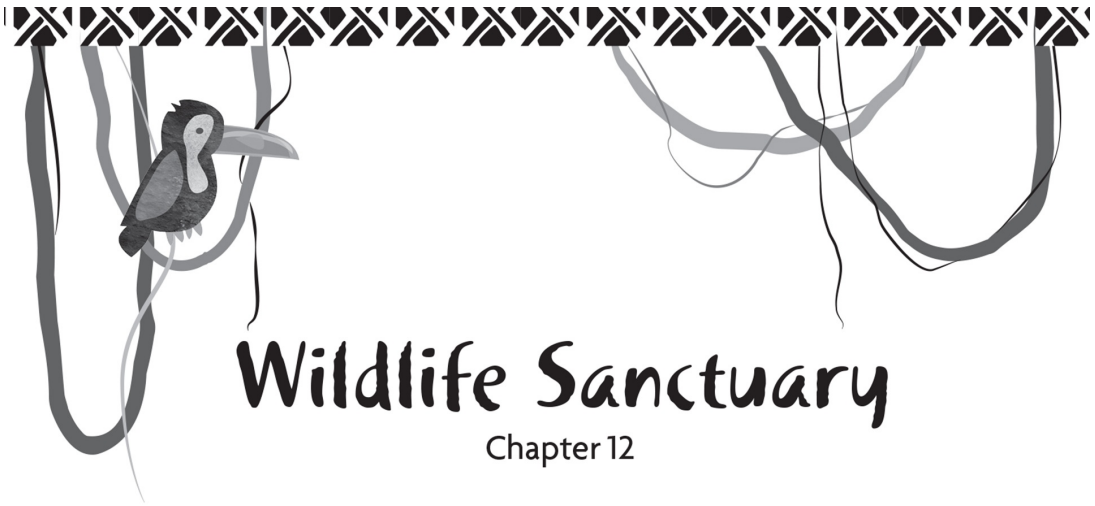
I gave Olivia a hopeful smile and then leaned over Amanda’s crate. “We’re going to try to get you help,” I whispered.

The hour-long drive felt like forever. Tomás and I took turns holding Amanda. She wouldn't—or maybe couldn't—drink anymore. She hardly moved and couldn't even lift her head. I blinked back tears.

As we drove, Zac tried to assure me that Amanda would be okay. "The sanctuary workers will know what's best for her. The only place she'd be safer is with her own mother."

That got me thinking about Abby's accusation. Questions tumbled over and over in my head. Was I wrong to take Amanda out of the rainforest? What if her mother came back for her and realized she was missing? Was I as bad as the poachers? On the other hand, what would have happened to Amanda had we not found her and taken her home? I looked at little Amanda, and my throat tightened.

I was about to ask Zac if I had done the right thing, but then I thought about how hard I had tried to convince him to help me save her. I couldn't tell him now that I was questioning our choice.



Wildlife Sanctuary

Chapter 12

A friendly woman with cropped blonde hair accented with a swatch of pink greeted us at the Amazonas Wildlife Sanctuary. “Olá! Hello,” she said, extending her hand and shaking Zac’s as Tomás gripped Macaco and hid behind me. “I’m Erika, the director of the wildlife sanctuary. You must be Zac. Professor Da Rocha told me to expect you. She says you’re one of her best students. I was an exchange student myself before I settled here in Brazil. Nice to meet you in person!”

Zac returned the handshake and then introduced Tomás and me.

“Muito prazer,” I said. “This is Amanda.” I turned so that she could see Amanda’s little face over my shoulder.

“May I?” she asked, reaching out to Amanda. Reluctantly, I handed her over. Erika’s friendly blue eyes got serious. “She doesn’t look well,” she said. “Please, follow me this way.”

Erika guided us into a room that looked like a doctor’s office. She gently set Amanda on a metal table and listened to her heart with a stethoscope. Tomás held both Zac’s and my hands as we all watched silently. Erika inspected Amanda’s fur, looked in her mouth and ears, and took a blood sample. Amanda was very brave and did not cry. I remembered being afraid to go to the doctor’s office when I was little. But I always got a sticker at the end for being brave.

Finally Erika handed Amanda back to me, and then wrote some things

down on a chart.

“She’s very lucky that you found her when you did,” she began. “Her injuries are consistent with a fall from a high place, and she has a fractured leg. From the look of her wounds, I would guess that she was attacked by a harpy eagle. Did you see her mother when you found her?”

Zac and I both shook our heads.

Erika pursed her lips. “It’s possible that she wasn’t as lucky as her baby.”

“You mean—” I began.

“Most likely the eagle made off with the mother.”

I was silent as tears welled in my eyes. How terrifying that must have been for Amanda and her mother…

“Baby sloths hold on to their mothers until they are about eight months old,” Erika continued. “I would venture that this little girl is about five or six months old. If they were being attacked, it’s likely that Amanda let go. It looks like her wounds are quite infected. If they go untreated, she could die.”

I gasped. “Do you think you can treat her?”

“Yes, I think so,” she said. “The good news is that antibiotics ought to clear up the infection in a few days. The bad news is that her leg will take much longer to heal, and a couple of her claws are broken, probably from the fall.”

“But Amanda’s going to be all right, isn’t she?” I asked. “Will she eventually be able to return to the rainforest?” Maybe Abby would see that I had done the right thing if I could just tell her that Amanda would return home.

Erika shrugged. “I can’t make any promises. But I’ll tell you what: You can leave Amanda here with us for now. We’ll give her medicine and monitor her for the next couple of days. If she pulls through, then we’ll come up with the best plan for her.”

I bit my lip and nodded. I couldn’t imagine leaving Amanda, but I knew she would be in good hands here.

Erika smiled. “Amanda needs a bath. Do I have any volunteers to help me?” She repeated her question in Portuguese for Tomás. He came out from behind me and raised his hand.

Erika filled two blue plastic tubs with warm water. She dipped Amanda in the shallow water of the first tub and showed Tomás and me how to gently wash her with baby shampoo, making sure to be careful with her fractured leg. Then we moved her to the second tub. Erika dropped a handful of leaves and flowers into the water. It smelled like a fragrant tea.

“This will keep Amanda parasite-free and smelling good,” Erika

explained as we rubbed the leaves and tea into her fur.

I gingerly lifted Amanda out of the bath. Erika wrapped her in a soft yellow towel. “Normally, we hang our sloths up to dry in the sun,” she said, pointing to a couple of sloths clinging to branches nearby. “But since Amanda’s claws are damaged, we are going to have to *teach* her how to hang on. For now, we’ll dry her with this.” Tomás’s eyes widened when she pulled out a blow-dryer. Zac held Amanda as Erika dried her, so I could take pictures.

Amanda looked so cute and fluffy when she was done with her spa treatment. I held her and buried my nose in her fur. She sure smelled better than she had when we arrived at the sanctuary. “You’re beautiful,” I told her. “But then, you always were.”

Zac turned to Tomás. “Should we give you a bath next?” he asked in Portuguese, and then again in English. Tomás giggled and offered up Macaco in his place.

Next, Erika set Amanda’s injured back leg in a small cast. “This way the bones will fuse correctly,” she explained.

Zac nudged me. “She looks like Dad.”

I giggled, remembering how Dad had hobbled around in his cast back in Praia Tropical. I took photos to share with him.

Erika finished the cast and applied some antibacterial ointment on Amanda’s wounds. “Now, this baby has been an excellent patient. I have something for her.”

A sticker! I mused. And I was right, sort of. Erika gave Amanda a hibiscus flower. *That’s so cute*, I thought. *A sloth version of a sticker that she can play with.* But I was wrong. Instead, the flower was to eat!

“Sloths love these,” Erika said. “They’re a real sweet treat.” Amanda nibbled on the flower slowly and happily.

Later, while Amanda napped, Erika gave us a tour. I was expecting that the sanctuary would look like a zoo, with penned-off areas for the animals. But I was surprised to see that most of the animals roamed free—although they did keep natural enemies separated. Monkeys scampered on couches, birds perched on the backs of chairs, and sloths hung upside down from a wooden pole that looked like the ballet barre I used to practice on when I was little.

Half a dozen volunteers and sanctuary personnel were bathing and feeding the animals. I watched a young man running after the most enormous guinea pig I had ever seen. It was as big as a dog!

“What is that?” I asked.

Erika chuckled. “That’s Clara the capybara. Capybaras are the biggest rodents in the world.” I took a quick photo to post to my blog.

Erika let me feed some passion fruit to a toucan named Tiago. When he was done, he let out a loud squawk. “That’s toucan for ‘thank you!’” Erika said.

Next, I got to hold a tiny monkey the size of my thumb. “Her name is Beatriz and she’s a pygmy marmoset,” Erika told me.

I laughed as the little monkey scrambled up my arm. “This place is better than any zoo I’ve ever been to!” I told Erika. “Do you get a lot of visitors here?”

“We’re different from a zoo,” Erika said. “The animals that find their way here are sick or injured, so it’s our job to rehabilitate them and return them to the rainforest. Also, zoos often charge an admission to see the animals. Here, we rely on donations and fund-raisers to take care of the animals. I wish we could take in all the animals that need our help, but we can’t afford to. We don’t have the space, the staff, or the resources. Still, we do what we can with what we have.”

Suddenly, I heard Tomás squeal. He was so excited he almost dropped Macaco. Tomás stood at a window, watching as a volunteer tended to some kittens. But these weren’t just any kittens—they were margays! They were so cute with their spotted fur and huge brown eyes. I whipped out my camera. Soon, a staff person brought in the mother margay and let her tend to her babies. The mother’s fur was thick and plush, and she had spots like a leopard. Her babies snuggled close to her and started nursing.

“Margay sightings are very rare,” Erika told us. “To see one with her kittens is even rarer. These babies are a couple of weeks old and have just recently opened their eyes.”

“Why are they here?” I asked. “Were they in danger?”

“The mother was in distress when we discovered her,” Erika said. “It was a difficult birth, but we were able to assist and deliver healthy babies. They will all stay here while the mother recovers. When she’s better, we’ll release the family back into the wild.”

Tomás looked so happy as he admired the kittens through the window. The volunteer picked up one of the kittens and brought him closer for Tomás to see. Tomás touched the window and giggled as the kitten batted at his finger through the glass.

Soon enough, it was time to go. My heart was so heavy that it hurt. How could I possibly leave Amanda?

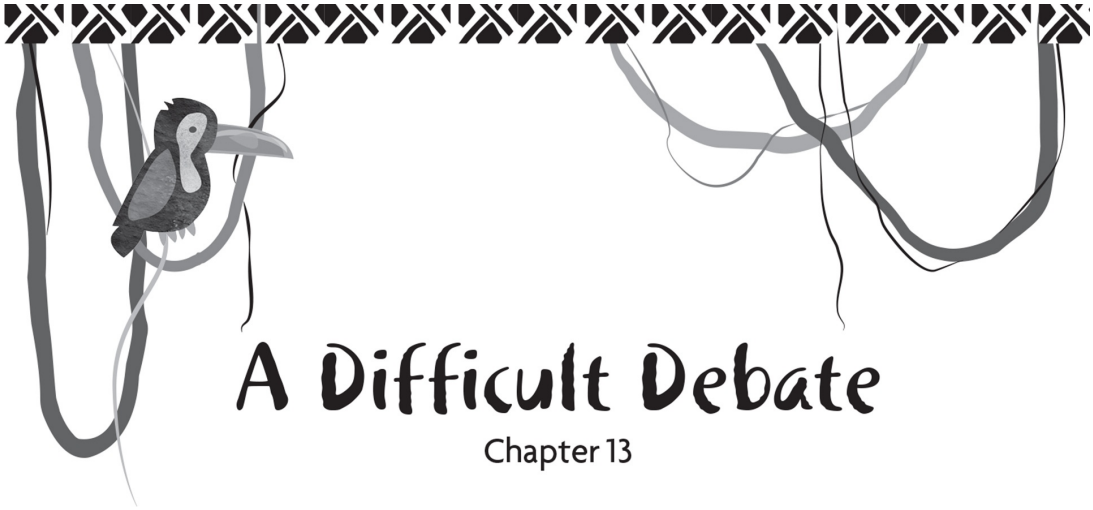
“Can we come back tomorrow?” I begged Zac. I was choking on my words, trying not to cry.

“Yes,” he said, giving me a hug. “Of course, Lea. We’ll come back.”

I noticed that Tomás was teary, too. We both took turns hugging and kissing Amanda, and then I set her down. As we headed for the truck, Tomás suddenly turned around and ran back toward the sanctuary.

“Tomás! Tomás, what are you doing?” I called out as I chased him. Was he going back to see the baby margays?

When I caught up with Tomás, he was kneeling over Amanda. He had given Macaco to her so that she wouldn’t be lonely, and she was hugging the stuffed monkey. When Tomás looked at me, I gave him a thumbs-up. Then, hand in hand, we walked to the truck where Zac was waiting for us.



A Difficult Debate

Chapter 13

When we finally got back to the Barroses' house, the sun was setting. Zac carried a sleeping Tomás inside, and Olivia put him to bed. When I looked at Amanda's empty crate, my heart ached. Without Amanda snuggled next to me, it felt like a part of me was missing.

After dinner, I went to Tomás's room. I was physically and emotionally exhausted, but I knew that my classmates were waiting to get an update on Amanda on my blog. I logged on to my blog site and sure enough, everyone was asking about Amanda. I let them know that she was in good hands, but that her survival was uncertain.

Then, I reread Abby's comment on my last post, the comment that had been bothering me:

> Really, Lea? I can't believe you took that sloth out of her natural habitat!

I took a deep breath and started typing a reply:

> Hi, Abby. Amanda needed help. I couldn't just leave her there to die. Your mother is a veterinarian and she saves animals' lives every day. How is this different?

I wondered when she would see my post. It was just past dinnertime in St. Louis. Abby was probably doing homework at her desk in her bedroom at this very minute. Still, I was surprised when Abby's reply popped up almost immediately.

ABBY: My mom saves pets' lives. That's the difference. They've been raised by humans. They are domesticated and rely on us for survival. They couldn't last on their own in the wild. But we shouldn't interfere with wild animals.

Interfere? Is that what she thought I was doing?

LEA: Remember in third grade when we saved Tweety, the bird who fell from his nest? In order to save him, we had to carry him to safety. You even helped by calling your mom and asking her what we should do. Left alone, Tweety would have died.

ABBY: The Amazon rainforest is different from St. Louis. The animals here are used to sharing their environment with people, and even depend on them to put out birdseed and plant trees in their neighborhoods. But in the rainforest, the cycle of life goes on without our help.

LEA: So are you saying I should have just left an orphaned baby sloth there to die alone?

I stared at the tablet screen, waiting for a reply from Abby. When I didn't see another post for the longest time, at first I was angry, then I was upset, and then I was sad. It felt awful to be arguing with my best friend.

Finally, another message popped up.

ABBY: I didn't know she was an orphan. Why didn't you tell me?! You only wrote that you found a baby sloth!

I felt stupid—I hadn't done a good job of explaining what was going on. No wonder Abby was upset with me! I quickly replied:

Amanda's mother was probably killed by a harpy eagle. Amanda

was helpless and alone. If we hadn't found her, someone—or something—else would have. I don't know if she'll survive at the sanctuary. But I do know it's her only chance for survival.

Abby, I know what you're saying about not interfering with the rainforest, but sadly that's not 100% true. We humans DO interfere: Loggers and ranchers are cutting down the forests, leaving the wild animals with fewer places to live. And poachers kidnap exotic animals. I wish I could solve all of these problems. When I found Amanda, I realized I could help save at least one animal—so I had to try.

After a few agonizing minutes, Abby finally replied.

Wow. I didn't realize that all that was going on. I get now that you did what you had to do to save that baby sloth. And it sounds like there are many more animals that need help.

There was a pause, and then she wrote:

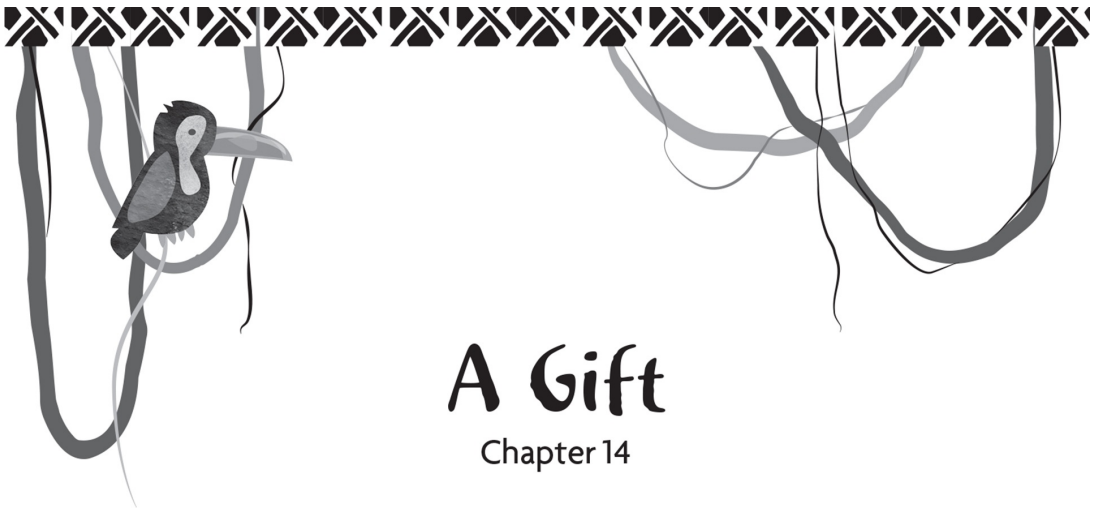
What can we do?

I was so happy that Abby finally understood. Then it occurred to me that my blog was the reason Abby knew about Amanda's plight—and now, about the plight of the other animals in the sanctuary and in the rainforest.

For the first time, I realized that my blog had the potential to make a difference. My classmates all cared. And if each of them told other people and got them to care, who knew what we could accomplish?

LEA: Get the word out! Tell others about the Amazon rainforest. I'm still learning a lot about it, and with this blog, I'll share what I learn. I know that it would be impossible for us to save all the animals, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Even if it's saving just one animal at a time.

Then I posted a picture of Amanda, all fresh and fluffy, and hit "send."



A Gift

Chapter 14

The next day, I sat on Tomás's bed reading all of my classmates' blog comments. They were super excited to help spread the word, and they were already planning some class projects to share information about the rainforest with other classes at Samuel Clemens Elementary.

Tomás sat across the room drawing a picture of Amanda. I was impressed that he had given his beloved Macaco to her yesterday. It reminded me of Ama's rule: When you visit a new place, you should always leave something behind.

But what could I leave behind for the rainforest, which had given me so much? It was here that I had been welcomed into the Barros family and found Amanda. I looked through my suitcase. What good would it do to leave behind a picture of my pet turtle—or my flip-flops? I had nothing to give.

Zac stuck his head in the door. "You ready?"

He had told Tomás and me that we could join him for a trip into town to pick up some groceries for Olivia. I grabbed my bag, making sure that I had my wallet. I had saved my birthday money along with my allowance for this trip and had yet to spend most of it. I was looking forward to finding something to remind me of my visit to Brazil. Maybe I'd find a souvenir this afternoon.

Tomás and Zac ran ahead as I followed them to the dock. It was faster to take the rowboat than to walk.

But before I could reach the dock, I heard a squawk. Galo Louco.

I took several slow steps toward the dock. Galo Louco strutted toward me, his eyes never leaving my face. But this time, instead of running, I took a step toward him. It was like a showdown, each of us determined not to be the first to look away.

"Lea, let's go!" my brother called from the dock.

"Shhh!" I said. "Just give me a minute."

My heart fluttered as Galo Louco came to a stop right in front of me and tilted his head. I knew he was about to start pecking at my feet, but before he could, I reached into my bag.

"This is for you," I said. Without taking my eyes off him, I pulled out a small banana that I had placed in my bag and waved it at him. "You don't scare me," I told the rooster.

I peeled the banana and broke off several small pieces, tossing them just behind him. Galo Louco looked at the banana and then looked at me. Then he made his choice.

As he happily gobbled up the banana, I stepped past him and made my way to the dock.

Zac stretched out his long legs as he waited for me to get my life jacket on. Tomás sat next to him and did the same. I had to laugh at the two of them sitting side by side, both wearing sunglasses, their hands behind their heads.

Since no one had picked up the oars, I did. *I can row a boat,* I thought. *How difficult can it be?*

Very difficult, it turned out. After watching me struggle, Zac helped me push off and then began to row with me. At first I tried too hard, plunging the oars deep into the water and using all my strength to bring them up again. But after a while, I figured out that if I loosened up and let the oar skim the water, the river would work with me instead of against me.

The little town was just as busy and vibrant as it had been when we drove through it on my first day in Santa Sofia. Zac stopped and chatted with almost everyone we passed. I didn't mind, though—it gave me time to look around. The shops were small and tidy. Inside the grocery store, I looked at the colorful packages of food that lined each aisle, trying to guess what was in each one. Although I had learned to say a handful of words in Portuguese, I still couldn't read it.

After Zac paid for the groceries, he continued chatting with the cashier

for a while longer. It was clear how much my brother was liked here in Santa Sofia. He seemed at home.

As we walked out of the market, I hooked my brother's arm in mine. "When are you coming back?" I asked.

"We'll head back in a few minutes," Zac said. "I just need to find a few more of the items on Olivia's grocery list."

"No, I meant when are you coming back to St. Louis?" I said.

"Oh. Well, you know I've got another half a year in Brazil," he said, picking up a pineapple from the fruit stand. "I'm going to see if maybe I can extend my studies and stay here a little longer, though. There's word that a new group of poachers has moved into this area. If there's any way I can help stop them, I'd like to try."

I hesitated. "But you *are* coming home, right? I mean, you're not staying in Brazil forever, are you?"

Zac put down the basket. He knit his brow and shook his head. "Lea," he said, "I'm lucky enough to have discovered my passion. I want to help save the Amazon rainforest, and the best place to do that would be here in Brazil."

I felt a lump in my throat. I didn't know what to say.

My brother continued. "I have to be honest with you: My studies and my work are going to take me all over the world. I'm not sure how often I'll be able to come home. But even though we may be far apart, I'll always be your brother. I'll always be thinking of you."

I remained quiet as I gathered my thoughts, and then I looked up at him with a smile. "Maybe I can visit you all over the world!" I said.

Zac grinned. "I'd love that." He gave me a hug and I hugged him back twice as hard.

"What did you buy?" Olivia asked when we got back to the house.

"Everything on your list," I said, double-checking. "Papayas, rice, beans __"

"Oh, I meant for yourself," she said. "I thought you were going to buy some souvenirs."

I put my hand on my purse. I had forgotten about shopping for myself.

I had just logged on to my laptop when I heard Zac call out, "Lea, Marcos is back and said we can use the truck now. Let's you and Tomás and I go visit Amanda!"

I only had time to glance at an e-mail that Camila had sent, saying that her mother said she could visit me during my spring break—and that was only about six weeks away! Although I was already starting to feel sad about leaving Zac and Amanda tomorrow, my heart lifted at the thought of seeing Camila again.

As we drove past the dense green wall of trees that bordered the road, I felt glad that I had spring break to look forward to. Camila had been so great taking me around Praia Tropical, and I couldn't wait to return the favor and show her St. Louis. Plus, she was going to get to meet Abby and, of course, Ginger. I just wished she could have met Amanda.

Up ahead, I saw some bushes with bright pink flowers. "Zac, look," I said. "Hibiscus!"

"For Amanda," Tomás said, knowing what I was thinking.

Zac pulled over and we all got out.

"*Olha!*" Tomás said. The hibiscus bush was abuzz with a flock of rainbow-colored hummingbirds. We watched in awe as the tiny birds zipped from flower to flower, dipping their long beaks into the center of each bloom.

Tomás picked hibiscus flowers for Amanda while I took a few photos of the hummingbirds. Then we hopped back into the truck, as excited as ever to see our adorable little friend.

At last, Zac drove up the gravel driveway that led to the wildlife sanctuary. The truck had barely stopped before I unbuckled my seat belt and ran inside. Tomás and Zac were close behind.

"Amanda? Erika?" I called out. I raced to Amanda's bed. It was empty, except for Macaco. "Amanda," I said softly. Where was she? And then I had a terrible thought: *Am I too late? Did she—*

"Lea!" said someone behind me. It was Erika, and she was holding Amanda.

"Oh, thank goodness!" I said. "How's she doing today?"

"I've just weighed her, and—well, the antibiotics aren't battling the infection quite as well as we had hoped."

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked, steeling myself for bad news.

"We're doing the best we can," Erika said.

I noticed that she hadn't answered my question.

My voice quivered when I asked, "May I hold her?"

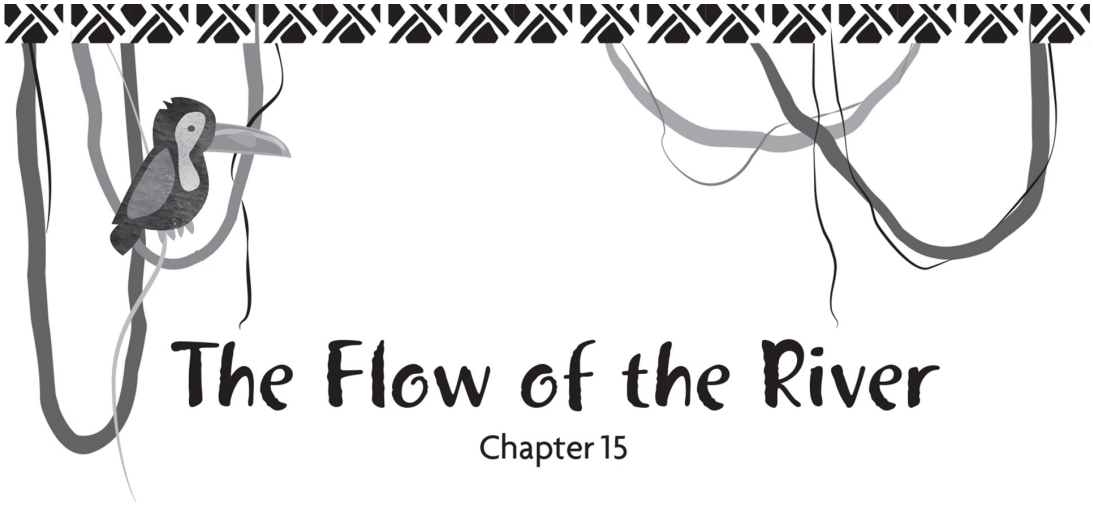
Erika nodded. "Of course. She'd like that."

I handed my camera to Tomás as I brought Amanda close to me. Her bath from the day before had worked wonders. Amanda's fur was still soft and she smelled great as I snuggled her. I never wanted to let her go.

“What will happen to her if—I mean *when* she gets better?” I asked as I held out the hibiscus flower and she began to nibble on it.

“If this little one can recover from her injuries and infection,” Erika said, “she’ll likely stay here for a while. After all, Amanda is still a baby. The missing claws may be a problem, but we’ll try to train her to latch on to trees without them. When she’s ready, we’ll reintroduce her to the rainforest. If she doesn’t take to the forest, or if her missing claws prove to be a problem, we’ll find a safe place for her. She’ll either stay here or, possibly, at a wildlife preserve. But for now, let’s just see whether she can recover.”

I hugged Amanda again and whispered, “You can do it. I know you can!”



The Flow of the River

Chapter 15

That night, I stayed up late to write my final blog post from Brazil. I looked around for my camera to download the latest photos—but I couldn't find it. For a moment I panicked, until I remembered that I had probably left it in the truck. It was too dark for me to go outside on my own to retrieve the camera, so I made a mental note to grab it from the truck before our sunrise cruise the next morning. Luckily, I had plenty of other photos already loaded on my tablet. I lingered over the photos of Amanda. Just thinking about her made my heart happy and sad at the same time.

I touched my wrist, expecting to find my pink wish bracelet—but it was gone! That's when I realized that it had granted me not just one wish—that Camila and I would always be great friends—but two more friendships that I hadn't expected.

I started typing my last post from the rainforest:

> At first I thought that Amanda was lucky I found her when I did, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that I'm the one who was lucky. Amanda has helped me see that the rainforest is not just a place on a map, but a home for millions of animals who need our help. One way we can help is to raise awareness of the dangers that face this unique environment, which is home to so many amazing animals.

Now that I have traveled from the coast of Brazil to deep in the Amazon rainforest, I love this country and everything in it. I hope that someday I can return. Until then, I'm leaving a piece of my heart behind.

I didn't know exactly when or where my wish bracelet had fallen off, but I did know that it was somewhere in the Amazon rainforest. I dedicated my last blog post to my three Brazilian friends: Camila, Tomás, and Amanda.

It seemed like I had just fallen asleep when it was time to wake up. It was still dark outside. I got dressed quickly, and then turned on my tablet to see if any of my classmates had commented since last night.

Zac rushed past the door and then screeched to a halt. He looked around the room. "Lea, are you packed yet? You're leaving today, so if we're going to get out on the river to watch the sunrise, you need to be packed before we go."

I threw my tablet on the bed and began stuffing my pajamas into my suitcase. Zac picked up my tablet and started scrolling through my blog.

I looked up. "My class has learned a lot about the rainforest," I told him. "Me too."

Zac nodded. "I can see that. I knew you took great photos, but the way you've written about the rainforest and Amanda is very moving. I'll bet if more people were able to read your blog, it would help bring some attention to what's going on here with deforestation and poaching."

"You really think so?" I asked.

He nodded.

My heart fluttered. If Zac liked what I had been posting, then maybe others would as well. Even though I'd be back in St. Louis all too soon, the rainforest and its wildlife would still be in danger and its story would need to be told. Zac could help me with that, and Erika and Marcos and Olivia, and even Tomás. *Especially* Tomás. Like me and my classmates, he was a part of the next generation—so what we did or did not do could determine the future of the rainforest.

I closed my suitcase and turned back to my tablet. At the bottom of last night's post, I added,

To be continued…

Tomás and Olivia were still asleep, but Zac was right behind me as we climbed into the canoe with Marcos. It was pitch black except for the light of the moon. As the canoe glided across the glassy black water, the buzz of cicadas and the croaking of tree frogs filled the air. Animals were all around me. They always had been.

"Get ready for one of the most incredible sights you'll ever see," Zac said.

I reached into my bag for my camera. *Oh no!* I had forgotten that it was still in Marcos's truck.

We rounded a bend and then glided down the river to where it opened up for miles and land was far away. There, Marcos cut the motor and let the canoe drift silently.

A warm pink-and-orange glow on the horizon reflected in the water as the sun began to rise. For a moment the sun hid behind some clouds, lighting them up from within. As the sun rose higher, the white clouds spread across the great expanse of sky that was now turning a light blue. Without the camera lens in front of me, I had a panoramic view of the river. Instead of taking a photo, I felt as though I were part of one. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. I took a mental picture, and knew it was something I would never forget.

When we returned, Tomás was waiting outside with my camera in his hands. I'd forgotten that I had handed it to him yesterday when I held Amanda. He must have had it this whole time.

"Obrigada," I said, ruffling his hair.

Tomás followed me inside and into the bedroom, and sat next to my open suitcase with a frown. He looked up at me with tears in his eyes.

"I know," I said. "I'll miss you, too."

I turned around to grab my sweatshirt off the back of the desk chair, and when I turned back, Tomás was gone.

"Lea!" Zac called out. "Time to go."

I closed my suitcase and grabbed my backpack, making sure that Ama's travel journal was in there. I planned to finish reading it on the plane. I also double-checked to make sure I had my camera this time.

I thought I had put my flip-flops by the bedroom door, but they were gone. I searched Tomás's room, looking under the bed, in the closet, and behind the door. They were nowhere to be found, so I dug a pair of sneakers out of my bag instead. I said one last good-bye to the Barroses' house and headed out the door.

Olivia hugged me tight as we stood next to the truck. "Come back anytime," she said. "We love your brother and we love you, Lea."

Marcos joined in for a group hug. "It has been wonderful getting to meet Zac's sister," he said. "Although now I'll think of him as Lea's brother," he joked.

"Where's Tomás?" I asked, eyeing Galo Louco, who was glaring at me from the edge of the yard. When he came near, I tossed a piece of apple that I had saved from breakfast at his feet. He clucked happily as he ate his treat.

Olivia shook her head. "I think Tomás is hiding," she said. "He was very sad this morning."

I felt a tug on my heart. "I can't leave without saying good-bye to him."

"Lea, we really should leave now if we're going to stop and see Amanda before we head to the airport," Zac said.

"Give me a minute," I told him. "I think I know where he is."

I went to the big tree where Tomás had given me the palm-leaf crown. "Tomás?" I said. "Tomás, I know you're up there." The leaves rustled. "Tomás, I want to say good-bye." One of my flip-flops dropped to the ground, followed by the other one. I couldn't help smiling. Tomás must have thought that if I didn't have my shoes, I'd have to stay!

"Tomás, I have to go now," I said.

The leaves rustled again and he climbed down slowly. I gave him a huge hug. When he started to cry, I bent down and wiped the tears from his face. He reached into his pocket and handed me a folded piece of paper. I opened it and smiled. It was a drawing of Amanda, him, and me. I held it to my heart and thanked him.

"You are like a brother to me," I told him. "Brother. *Irmão*."

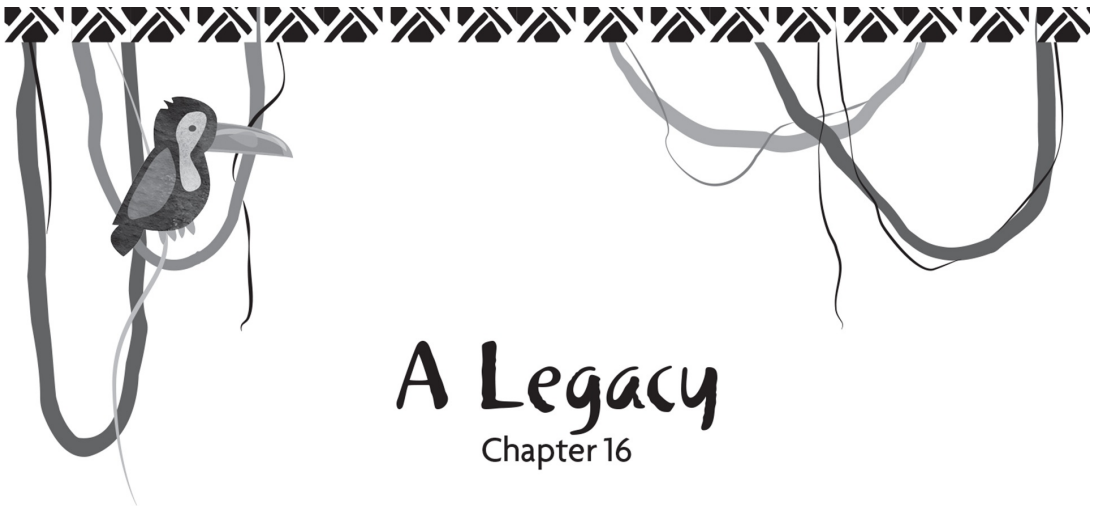
This made him smile. He pointed to me and said, "*Irmã*. Sister."

"So what do you think of your first international adventure?" Zac asked as he drove. "You swam in the ocean—and even in the Amazon River!—you created a wonderful blog about Brazil, and you rescued a baby sloth!"

I smiled. "And I made friends with a crazy chicken," I added. "Don't

forget that!”

We both broke out laughing. I thought about the Meeting of the Waters at the beginning of my visit to the rainforest, where the river flowed black on one side and light coffee brown on the other. Maybe that was like Zac and me. We were very different and we always would be. But like the river, we were side by side, moving in the same direction, giving each other strength—and together we could really accomplish something. After all, together we had helped rescue Dad when he fell off the cliff, we had rescued and found a home for Amanda, and now we would help spread the word of the dangers that faced the rainforest. I couldn’t have done any of those things alone, nor would I have wanted to.



A Legacy

Chapter 16

My heart beat faster the closer we got to the wildlife sanctuary. I needed to know how Amanda was doing. A plan was beginning to take shape in my mind, but it sort of depended on Amanda.

I pulled out Ama's travel journal and thumbed through it until I found the pages I was looking for: the story about Georgie, the young giraffe my grandmother had adopted in Tanzania.

Zac had called Erika and let her know we were coming, and she and Amanda met us outside. Something had changed in Amanda. Her eyes sparkled as she raised her paw up to play with Erika's dangling earring.

"Someone had a great night," Erika said, laughing. "The medication finally kicked in. That happens sometimes, because we're not always sure what dosage or what prescriptions will work best for each animal."

"So she's going to survive?" I asked hopefully.

"It looks like it," Erika said, grinning. Without my having to ask, she placed Amanda in my arms. "This little girl has a lot of spunk for a sloth!"

"I know someone else who could sometimes be mistaken for a sloth, but has a lot of spunk," Zac teased, nudging me.

I ignored him. "Erika," I said as I held the baby sloth close, "I'd like to adopt her."

"Lea, we've been through this," Zac said, lowering his voice. "You can't take her home with you."

“That’s not what I meant. I want to help pay for her food or medication, or whatever she needs,” I said. “I have some money from my birthday that I’ve saved, and I’m going to set aside some of my allowance every week. Plus, I’m pretty sure I can get some other kids at school to contribute, too. I’m hoping that with your help, I can follow Amanda’s journey on my blog. Maybe you could keep me updated?”

“I would gladly do that, Lea.” Erika smiled. “And we would be happy to accept your donation. You could be Amanda’s fairy godmother!”

I grinned and kissed the baby sloth. “Even though I may be far away,” I whispered to her, “I will always be thinking of you.”

It was a tearful farewell as Mom and Dad embraced Zac, and more crying when I said good-bye to him. But I knew that we would be connected through my blog—and that someday I’d get to visit him in exotic places all over the world.

As the plane took off, I looked out the window. The green Amazon rainforest went on for miles, but I knew now that the rainforest and its wildlife wouldn’t go on forever unless we humans did more to preserve it.

I picked up my camera to take some aerial photos, and then I scrolled through the photos of my trip. I smiled when I saw the shots of Tomás looking at the margays and made a mental note to send them to him. That’s when I noticed that there were pictures on the camera I didn’t remember taking. Most were blurry and oddly cropped, but a few were in focus. They were of me! There I was holding Amanda: There was one shot of us nose-to-nose, another with Amanda’s head on my shoulder, and yet another of us looking lovingly at each other.

Who took these photos? I wondered. Slowly it dawned on me: Tomás. He’d had my camera for my last twenty-four hours in Brazil, and he’d been using it.

“Thank you, Tomás,” I whispered. I had always been so busy behind the camera that there were few photos of me in front of it.

I put the camera down and settled in with Ama’s last travel journal. I was eager to read about more of her adventures. She had just visited Egypt and was looking forward to seeing Beijing. But when I turned the page, it was blank. I turned another page, and then another—they were all blank. I turned back to her last entry, and that’s when it hit me. The date was around the same time Ama had learned she was sick. She never did make it to Beijing.

My heart felt heavy as I looked out the window at Brazil below me. I

wished there was some way I could keep Ama's legacy alive. Then I had an idea. I scrounged around my backpack for a pen, and I opened Ama's journal to the first blank page. I took a deep breath, and wrote:

> *My name is Lea Clark, and I am Amanda Cooper's granddaughter. Like Ama, I am an adventurer. Recently, I visited Brazil, where I met a new friend, found a little brother, and became the fairy godmother for a baby sloth named Amanda.*

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To Mary See
Thank you for always being there for me.

— L. Y.

For my grandmother Terry,
who never let her fears stop her.
Thank you for showing me what it
means to live life to the fullest.

— K. H.

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Camila Is Coming!

Chapter 1

Lea, how's the cake coming?" my mom asked as she looked over at me from the island in the center of our sunny kitchen.

"Good!" I replied. I was perched in our corner breakfast nook, surrounded by eggs, sugar, butter, cream cheese, flour, and our bright red mixer, which Mom had set up just for me. I cracked two eggs into the bowl of the mixer and studied my recipe.

"I think that's everything… Oh wait, vanilla!" I jumped off my chair and did a running slide in my socks over to the spice cabinet.

"Slow down, honey," Mom laughed. "It's not a race!"

I nodded, standing on tiptoe to grab the vanilla. I knew she was right—but I was so giddy, it was impossible to slow down. In just a few hours, the girl I'd met two months ago in Brazil, Camila Cavalcante, was arriving in St. Louis to stay with us for an *entire week!* My stomach did an excited flip. Yesterday in class, I'd been counting the minutes until spring break arrived, but ever since I'd woken up this morning, time felt like it was flying…and so was I.

I measured out the vanilla and poured it over the other ingredients. In honor of Camila's arrival, I was making my favorite dessert—gooey butter cake, a St. Louis tradition. I'd made it before with my mom's help, but this was the first time I was baking on my own. I turned on the mixer. As I listened to the soothing sound and watched the paddle whip everything into a rich golden batter, I took what felt like my first real breath of the day.

I'd already straightened up my older brother Zac's room, where Camila would be sleeping. Plus I'd cleaned my room, and now it was so neat that I didn't even recognize it! I'd also changed the water in my pet turtle Ginger's aquarium, although she didn't exactly seem grateful. But then, Ginger wasn't big on expressions. Turtles seldom are.

Before starting the gooey butter cake, I'd made sure to set the dining

room table for the welcome dinner we were having for Camila. The fancy place settings made it feel as if we were having Christmas in April.

Mom came over and peered at the buttery yellow batter as I turned off the mixer. “Looks pretty gooey,” she said, smiling. She stuck in a pinkie and tasted the batter. “Perfect-o!” she exclaimed. Without missing a beat, she handed me the baking dish we always used for gooey butter cake.

She watched as I carefully poured the batter into the pan. It was hard to keep steady when all I could think of was the creamy, sweet gooey butter cake still warm from the oven!

As the cake began to bake, I set the timer.

“There,” my mother sighed. “Task #14 done.”

“Only 437 more to go!” I said cheerfully.

Mom laughed, but she looked tired. With a full-time job plus taking care of our family, she was always busy, and today was no exception. Mom was making toasted ravioli, Caesar salad, and her famous garlic bread, all from scratch, to welcome Camila.

“Did you clear out a few drawers in Zac’s room for Camila to use?” Mom asked.

“Oh no, I forgot!” I said. “I’ll go do it now.” I think my mother could sense that I was mad at myself, because as I crossed to the doorway, she called after me.

“Sweetheart?” she said gently. “It’s okay if everything isn’t exactly perfect. I’m sure Camila will just be happy to see you.” I knew she was right, but I couldn’t help thinking, *Camila’s never been to St. Louis before. I want to make sure she loves it.*

I ran down the hall to the front entry and hustled up the stairs, holding the banister. Our house is more than a hundred years old, and Dad always jokes that it’s held together by charm. It’s kind of true—the stairs lean a little, and none of the doors stay shut. Still, I love it. My mom says it’s “a typical Second Empire Victorian,” but its high tin ceilings and curlicue woodwork make me feel like we live in a life-size dollhouse.

I stopped to catch my breath on the landing, plopping onto the worn purple velvet bench seat by the bay window. I love the view from here onto Hickory Street, where we live. Below, old maple trees line the block, shading the brick row houses painted in bright hues of blue and pink and yellow. Our neighborhood is known as Lafayette Square. At its heart is Lafayette Park, an

elegant garden with wrought-iron gates and a gurgling fountain. Although the houses are old, the lively shops and restaurants make it feel like a quirky mix of old and new, past and present—just how my parents like it.

"Lafayette Square suits our family," Dad often says, and I have to agree. Both of my parents like looking at old things in new ways. My father teaches history at Washington University, and my mother is an architect specializing in restoring old buildings. They renovated our house together when my brother Zac was little. Every time I walk through the rooms, I feel like the house is a treasure my parents found and saved for me.

In Zac's room, as I cleared his old clothes out of two dresser drawers for Camila to use, I screamed when I came across his rubber snake collection. Zac! Even though he was far away, he could still make me laugh. His walls were plastered with posters of the Grand Canyon and icy Antarctica next to action shots of pro surfers. Like my grandmother Ama, my brother loves to travel and explore the outdoors. That's a big reason why he'd decided to study abroad for his last year of college. Back in February, I'd gone with my parents to visit Zac in Brazil. It was the most incredible trip ever. Although it was far from easy (we got lost in the jungle, and my dad broke his leg), I got over my fear of the ocean, rescued a baby sloth…and met Camila!

Zac was still in Brazil, doing research on poaching in the Amazon rainforest. I tried to picture what he might be doing right now—taking photographs of a rare insect, or canoeing past a caiman. For a moment, I wished I could be there with him. Then I thought, *No…Camila and I are going to have our own adventure here!*

Camila and I had gotten along so well in Praia Tropical, the Brazilian seaside town where we met. She was always laughing, always moving, and was full of questions about my life in St. Louis. We'd been sending each other jokes and photos over e-mail ever since we met. When Camila mentioned she was going with her parents to visit relatives in Chicago, I'd suggested that she come to St. Louis afterward. It's only a half-hour flight, but I don't think either of us really expected our parents would agree to it. When they did, my heart did a happy cartwheel.

"I think it'll be a great experience for both of you girls," my mom had said, "especially since you've been able to keep your friendship going from so far away." Camila had already flown with her family all the way from Brazil. Now she was flying here from Chicago all on her own. She was definitely adventurous.

As I walked out of Zac's room, Dad called to me from downstairs. "Lea!" he said. "We need to head to the airport in five."

The airport! Camila! "Okay!" I said, and ducked into my room. I grabbed my sweater and took a look around. Ginger was napping on her

favorite rock in her tank, worn out from the morning's activity. My bed was made, its floral quilt folded neatly below the scrolled wood headboard, and my journal lay facedown on my desk where I'd been writing in it that morning. Of course, it wasn't just my journal. Originally the red leather-bound book had been Ama's diary, one of many she kept over the years as she traveled the world. After she died, I'd taken her journals with me on our trip to Brazil. They inspired me so much that I'd decided to pick up where Ama had left off—recording my own travel adventures.

I turned over the journal and looked at my most recent entry.

Dear Journal,

Although I'm only traveling to the airport and back today, it still counts as an adventure, because CAMILA IS ARRIVING AND I AM SO EXCITED! Can you tell? :) I can't wait to see her again, and show her all the great things about St. Louis!

When I came downstairs, it smelled like a bakery. Dad was waiting for me. I looked through the oven's glass window. Golden bubbles were forming on top of the gooey butter cake. I inhaled the delicious scent. "Behave while I'm gone," I ordered the cake.

"Don't worry," laughed Mom. "Your cake will be here when you get back. And so will Camila!"

"What are you going to show Camila while she's here?" my father asked me as we entered the freeway ramp.

I began to list everything I'd been thinking. "The Arch, Grant's Farm, City Museum, the Mississippi steamboats, the Opera House…"

"Hold on," said Dad, changing lanes toward the airport. "That might be too ambitious. Camila's only here for eight days. Don't forget, you two are doing that photography class at COCA."

Yes! How could I forget? COCA is the Center of Creative Arts, one of the coolest places in St. Louis. Every school vacation they hold a day camp for kids. In the summer it's usually for the performing arts, but during spring break they were holding a visual arts camp, and Camila and I were enrolled in the photography class. I'd convinced my best friend Abby to take the class with us, too. I just hoped she and Camila would get along.

Taking photos is one of my favorite things to do. My blog about the Amazon rainforest is filled with photos I took when I was there. On the weekends, Abby and I like to walk her dog around our neighborhood, and all around are interesting things for me to photograph. Once I took a photo of a man walking down the street with his pet ferret on his shoulder, and in the picture, he and the ferret had the exact same look on their faces! I love watching the world go by until I see a picture I want to take. When that happens, it feels like everything slows down and comes into focus.

Dad had arranged for us to meet Camila at the flight arrival gate. We waited as passengers streamed through the open doors. Finally, Camila appeared. She looked a little lost, but as soon as she saw me, she burst into a smile. I ran up and with a little hop, she hugged me.

"How was your flight?" I asked as we headed to the baggage area. "Okay," she replied. "I am glad it was short." I nodded, remembering that Camila was afraid of heights. "I closed the window shade to try to forget we were in the clouds," she said, frowning.

Camila's bright purple bag was waiting at the luggage carousel. Dad picked it up, and we started back to the car. A breeze hit us when we exited the terminal, and Camila shivered. "I did not think it would be so cold right now," she said. "Usually, we visit in summer."

"It's actually pretty warm for April," I replied, but Camila wrapped her arms around herself as if she was freezing.

As Dad drove home, Camila looked out at the gray skyline. I couldn't tell what she was feeling, so I just kept talking. I talked about Lafayette Square, and camp, and photography, and Abby, who couldn't wait to meet her.

"My best friend Abby's mother is a veterinarian, and their house is like a rescue shelter," I told her. "They have a dog and two cats and a parrot and a new puppy named Tiny that they're fostering. We can go over and play with them, since she just lives two blocks away."

Camila gave a faint smile, pressing her cheek against the window, and closed her eyes.

Was it my imagination, or did Camila seem less than excited to be here? *She's probably just tired*, I said to myself, but worry started digging into my stomach. *What if Camila thinks St. Louis is boring?* Brazil is colorful and dramatic, with its huge rainforest full of wild monkeys and sloths, and its endless beaches. Everything is warm there, even the ocean. Compared to that, St. Louis could seem kind of blah.

I looked out the window. The passing stone buildings and trees blended together in a dull grayness. I sighed. Then, in the distance, something caught

my eye. It was the gleaming silver loop of the Gateway Arch. Seeing it somehow made me feel better. *St. Louis is great,* I reminded myself. *I just have to make sure Camila has an amazing time, that's all.*

Seeing in a New Way

Chapter 2

Camila's welcome dinner flew by in a whirl of food and laughter. My father made sure to keep the bad puns coming. "Don't mind my *cheesy* sense of humor," he said to Camila as he handed her the basket of mozzarella garlic bread.

"Ugh, *Dad!*" I said, shaking my head, but Camila laughed. Although she hadn't said much, she seemed happier than she had been in the car, especially when I started talking about all the places I wanted to show her.

"You have to see the Arch close up, obviously," I said. "Hopefully we'll also have time to go to Grant's Farm. They have *dozens* of horses and a huge petting zoo," I told her. "Oh, and we have to go see my mom's new project! She's helping to rebuild an old mansion."

Camila looked interested. "Really?" she said to my mom. "This is what you do?" My mother nodded.

"She takes old buildings that are about to collapse and fixes them so they're as good as new, or better," I explained. I'd seen photographs of some of the houses my mom had restored, but I'd never been to one of her building sites before. I loved the idea of visiting.

As Dad served gooey butter cake, I told Camila it was a St. Louis specialty. I watched as she took her first bite.

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. "It is sweet!"

"Lea made it for you," my mom told her.

"It's my favorite dessert," I added.

Camila nodded, her mouth full. "I think now it is *my* favorite, too!"

After dinner, when we finished clearing the dishes, I took Camila upstairs to show her my room.

On the stairs, she paused. "Is this your grandmother?" she asked, looking at the photographs lining the staircase wall. She pointed to a picture of Ama in a snorkeling mask in Bali.

“That’s her,” I said. In the photo, Ama was beaming and giving a thumbs-up. Around her neck hung the compass necklace she always wore.

I squinted again at Ama’s picture. I could just barely make out the flower on the compass’s face. I’d never seen another compass like it before. Looking at it, I felt sadness wash over me. I had left Ama’s necklace in Brazil, as an offering to the Goddess of the Sea, Yemanjá. I knew I had done the right thing, but part of me wished the compass was still hanging around my neck, to remind me of my grandmother.

I showed Camila the other pictures of Ama on the wall. There were photographs of her at all different ages—with Grandpa Bill on their wedding day in 1960, and then later, with my mom as a baby. Mostly, though, there were photos of her exploring: surfing in Mexico, cross-country skiing in Siberia, and skydiving with Zac on his eighteenth birthday. I loved the shot of her leaping over a boulder on Bondi Beach in Australia, hair flying. The look of sheer joy on her face seemed to lift her up. Although Ama hadn’t started traveling until she retired, she was still the most adventurous person I’d met. “*I’m not fearless,*” she used to say, “*but I don’t let my fear stop me.*” When I looked at all the photos of her, pride swirled with sadness inside me.

“Your grandmother was a very unusual person,” Camila said.

I nodded. Worried that I might cry, I swallowed hard and changed the subject. “Do you want to see my room?”

The minute Camila started looking around my bedroom, I felt a little nervous. My walls were covered in a jumble of maps and photos. I wished I had put away the *National Geographic* magazines stacked on my night table and piled by my bed. Camila didn’t seem to notice all my things, though. The second she spotted my turtle, she headed over to her tank.

“Ginger is so cute!” Camila exclaimed. “Even cuter than in pictures.” Ginger lifted her head up to look at Camila. I showed Camila how Ginger liked it when I scratched her under her scaly chin, and how to pick her up. Camila stood, cradling Ginger and squinting at a map of India with a dozen tiny colored pins stuck in it. “Why have you put these here?” she asked.

“Those are all the cities in India I want to visit,” I told her. “Delhi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Agra…Every time I see a photo of a place I want to go, I put it on the wall with a map.” Camila wandered around, looking at the maps of Japan, Paris, Tangier, and the Galápagos Islands. “I once made a list of all the places I wanted to go,” I explained, “but I kept adding to it so I ran out of space. It was just easier to put up maps and photos instead.”

“Where is the map of St. Louis?” Camila asked.

“I don’t have one,” I said.

Camila raised her eyebrows, surprised. “Why not?” she replied.

“Because it’s my hometown,” I said, shrugging. “I already know all about St. Louis.”

My eyes came to rest on the most recent photo I’d added to the wall. It was a shot of me with Camila on the beach. We were wearing swimsuits and colorful wish bracelets. Looking at the picture made me happy—and a bit nervous. Brazil was like a festive party dress. Compared to it, St. Louis seemed like jeans and sneakers.

After Camila turned in for the night, I checked my tablet. I had a new e-mail from Zac! Ever since he went to Brazil, it had been tough to keep in touch, especially lately. Last week he had moved from the town of Santa Sofia, where he’d been living with the Barros family, to Manaus, a large city in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. He was now doing research and working at an animal sanctuary. I hadn’t heard from him since the move, so I was excited to get an e-mail.

Hey, Lea,

Hope you’re enjoying your reunion with Camila. Things are good here. The Manaus sanctuary is smaller than the one near Santa Sofia that took care of Amanda, but they really need me here, so I’m getting to do a lot for the animals. Yesterday I helped rescue a pair of baby macaw parrots! I’ll try to send some pictures soon. Give Mom, Dad, and Camila big hugs for me.

xoxo Z

Warmth wrapped around me. I loved knowing that Zac was helping animals. He and I had worked together to rescue Amanda, an orphaned baby sloth. We had found her alone in the forest, weak and injured, and taken her to a wildlife sanctuary near Santa Sofia. I had helped them treat her and nurse her back to health. Amanda was still growing and getting stronger, and the vet there, Erika, sent me adorable pictures of her every week. Sloths are so cute! I couldn’t wait to see Zac’s pictures of the animals he was working with.

The next morning, Dad dropped us off at the Center of Creative Arts for the first day of photography camp. COCA is a sleek glass and metal building. Although it looks very modern, it’s already a local landmark. A few years earlier, they’d done a big renovation to restore it to look exactly as it did when

it was built. Mom had worked on the project, so whenever I went there, I felt especially proud.

Kids were swarming the registration desks by the front entrance. Once we checked in, we pushed through a pair of huge glass doors into the busy lobby. Along the back wall stretched a tile mosaic of the St. Louis skyline against a swirling starry sky. Camila looked around, excited. “Wow,” she said. “Can we take a selfie?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed. We crammed together in front of the mosaic. I lifted up my camera, but as I snapped, someone jostled me from behind.

“Lea!” It was my best friend Abby, wearing a grin as wide as her headband. Her thick black curly hair was pulled up in two mini buns, and she was wearing a plaid dress, red tights, and her usual round-framed glasses. Abby’s mom is black and her dad is white, and with her mom’s broad smile and her dad’s loud laugh, she’s a perfect blend of them. Like me, she loves animals. Having so many rescue pets means Abby’s always covered in pet hair, but she doesn’t mind. She says what she means and doesn’t care what anyone thinks of her—two reasons why I really like her.

Before I could say, “You photobombed our selfie!” Abby started shaking Camila’s hand, laughing and peppering her with questions.

“Camila, right?! You look just like your photo. I’m Abby Hudson. So, what do you think of St. Louis? Have you been here before?”

I could tell that Camila didn’t understand everything, but she tried to keep up with Abby’s questions. “Nice to meet you, Abby… No, I have never before been to St. Louis…”

As we walked to class, Abby paused for a second. “Honestly, you guys, I’m worried about taking photography. What if I’m bad at it?” She grimaced. “I usually spend spring break playing soccer at the community center.”

“I love soccer!” Camila said enthusiastically. “I play forward.”

“Cool!” Abby said. “I’m a goalie. I also play the oboe. I like taking photos with my phone, but I’m not like Lea here—she’s an *expert*.” She grinned at me.

“I’m not,” I said, modest.

“Well, you’re more of an expert than me,” Abby insisted. “You took third place in a national photography contest last year.”

“I am also not an expert,” Camila confessed, sounding relieved that she wasn’t the only one.

“Great!” Abby told her. “We can be beginners together!”

When we walked into class, six kids were already there, sitting in front of sleek silver computers. The walls were lined with posters of different

photographs. A tiny short-haired woman wearing big jingly earrings stood up front. She waved to us as we came in.

"Our last photographers have arrived!" she said. "Welcome! I'm Nedra Garcia, a.k.a. Ms. Garcia, and I'll be your teacher. Please, pick a computer."

Camila sat between Abby and me in the front row. Ms. Garcia gave us a friendly smile as she handed out digital cameras to the students who hadn't brought one.

"Make sure you take good care of these," she said. "Now, before I talk about what we're going to do, I want to hear what each of you hopes to get out of this class. So speak up."

Kids started raising their hands. Most of them wanted to learn Photoshop to get rid of mistakes or shadows in their photos. A red-haired boy named Kevin wanted to learn how to use Instagram better.

Abby waved her hand. "I want to learn how to take a photo without accidentally putting my thumb in front of the lens," she said. A few kids laughed. "It's true! It happens a *lot*!"

"I think you'll find it easier to avoid that with a real camera, if you're used to using a phone," said Ms. Garcia with a smile. Her eyes flicked over to me. "And what about you—"

"Lea," I said. "I just want to learn how to take better photographs."

"That's a great goal," Ms. Garcia replied. Her earrings swayed as she nodded. She looked around the room at the class. "This week, I'll be teaching the basics of Photoshop. You'll learn how to set filters, crop, and adjust color and brightness, all basic skills in digital photography. I should warn you, however, that knowing how to erase red-eye is not the same thing as learning how to take a good photograph."

Ms. Garcia turned to look straight at me. "That's because a good photo isn't about filters or lenses or photo apps. It's about how you look at the world. A good photographer is always trying to see things in a new way, to discover what's being overlooked, to show the viewers something they've never seen before, or show it in a *way* they've never seen before."

Confusion clouded my thoughts. I knew I was good at photography. Everyone said my photos were great. But I didn't really know what Ms. Garcia meant by "seeing in a new way."

Ms. Garcia walked over to a poster of a vintage-looking black-and-white photo. In it, a woman in a black evening dress stood between two elephants, her arms elegantly stretching to touch their curving trunks.

"This photograph is a classic," said Ms. Garcia. "It was taken by Richard Avedon. There are many reasons why it's so good, but the main reason is… have you *ever* seen a woman in a dress like this with two elephants?"

I hadn’t.

“It’s totally unexpected,” she explained, “which makes it memorable. Not only that, but the lighting, the positioning, the focus and composition all work together to make it unique and beautiful.”

Ms. Garcia moved to another black-and-white photo, of a group of workmen eating lunch sitting on a steel beam…thousands of feet in the air above a city!

“No one knows who took this picture,” she said. “At first glance it looks perfectly normal, right? Just a group of men having lunch at work suspended in midair. Yet it’s also extraordinary, because it gives you a perspective on the city, and on construction workers, that the public had never seen before it was published.”

Finally, Ms. Garcia crossed to a color photo of a young girl. She was wearing a red headscarf, and her sea-green eyes stared straight into the camera. Excitement bubbled inside me as I recognized her. *I know that picture!* I thought. *It’s from* ***National Geographic****!*

“This image isn’t of something unusual,” Ms. Garcia continued. “It’s a simple portrait of a girl from Afghanistan. What makes it distinctive is how the photographer captures her intense expression. Looking at her face, you see the world through her eyes for a moment.”

I silently agreed. *I wonder if I’ll be able to take a picture that good someday*, I mused.

“So now, it’s your turn,” Ms. Garcia said. Again, it seemed like she was talking right to me, until I realized she was looking at the whole class. “I want each of you to go out there and take a photograph of something that you think is unusual or memorable. You have ten minutes to go anywhere on this floor, starting…*now!”*

We all looked at one another. Ms. Garcia waved us along, grinning. “Go on. Time’s running out!”

I jumped up. I knew exactly what I wanted to photograph.

I headed straight to the mosaic of St. Louis at night, in the lobby. Up close, the starry sky was made up of tiny tiles in a hundred different shades of blue dappled with silver. They fit together like shimmering puzzle pieces. I had an urge to take a close-up of a patch of tiles, but then I got worried—what if no one could tell what I had photographed? I didn’t want that. So I stepped backward. Keeping the mosaic perfectly centered in my frame, I took several shots, then looked at the photos in the viewer. They were all in focus, but the second shot was my favorite. I deleted all the other ones.

When everyone got back to class, Ms. Garcia downloaded our photographs onto her computer. We gathered around and looked at the

pictures one by one.

"Don't say which one you took," she told us. "Let's just talk about what we think of each."

There were pictures of the sky, and the lobby, and the main COCA sign. One boy had taken a photograph of himself in a mirror. It was blurry but still nice. "I like the angle," said Ms. Garcia.

Finally, my photograph of the mosaic popped up. Ms. Garcia looked at it for a long moment, considering. "This photograph is very nicely composed."

"What does that mean?" someone asked.

"It means the photographer is thinking about the position of the camera to the subject, and where objects are in the frame," Ms. Garcia said. I blushed, pleased. "If I had to identify one aspect of it to be improved," she continued, "it's that it could be more…surprising."

I felt myself turn red again—and this time, it wasn't with pride. What did she mean, *surprising?*

"Still, it's a very pretty picture," said Ms. Garcia, but I barely heard her. My cheeks were on fire as we made our way back to our seats. What did Ms. Garcia mean? Was she saying that my picture was…*boring*?!

Ms. Garcia's voice broke into my thoughts. "Don't worry," she said. "You're all going to have plenty of chances this week to take photos and improve your skills. Every morning, we will become 'urban explorers.' We'll be visiting different neighborhoods to take photographs. Some areas you may know and some you may not, but hopefully you'll all discover and photograph parts of St. Louis that you didn't know existed. After all, this city's been around for two hundred and fifty years. There's a lot more here than frozen custard and Cardinals baseball games," she said, grinning. "Not that those things aren't great."

"They *are*," Abby whispered to Camila, who giggled.

"Your goal will be to learn to see things in a new way," said Ms. Garcia. "On the last day of camp, you'll select and frame your best work, and it will be part of a camp-wide evening art show so your family and friends can see what you've created. Some of the images will also be selected for publishing in the fall issue of COCA's magazine."

Abby nudged me. "I bet they'll pick one of your pictures, Lea," she said. "You're a *great* photographer!"

My stomach sank. It was nice that Abby had confidence in me, but after everything Ms. Garcia had said, I knew that if I was going to take a photograph that was really great, I had a *lot* of work to do.

Coventry House

Chapter 3

After camp, my dad picked Camila and me up in the station wagon. Normally he would be busy teaching history and grading papers, but since he was on sabbatical this semester, this week he was our driver.

"How was photography class?" Dad asked.

"All right," I said, thinking back to Ms. Garcia's comment that good photographers push themselves to "see in a new way." I had no idea what she meant, so how was I ever going to become a better photographer?

"It was very good, Mr. Clark," Camila volunteered from the backseat. "I think I'll learn a lot. And Lea and I will both take some good pictures for the art show."

My dad perked up. "There's a show, huh?"

Camila told Dad all about the final exhibition at the end of camp.

He looked impressed. "Sounds exciting. I can't wait to see what *develops*!"

My father had a doctor's appointment to see how his broken leg was healing, so he was dropping us off with Mom at her work site. As we turned onto the street where her building was, I noticed that the houses here were much bigger than the ones on Hickory Street. Some had boarded-up windows. A few even looked like they were about to fall down.

"This is Old North St. Louis," Dad said as he turned a corner. "It's one of the city's most historic neighborhoods. Many of these houses were built around the same time as ours was." Our car rolled to a stop. "Here we are!"

Before us stretched a dark stone building as wide as three regular houses put together. It had huge curved front windows and a front door that seemed tall enough for a giraffe to walk through, with polished green stone columns on either side. As I looked up, I saw why the house needed my mother. The upper levels were sagging, and parts seemed to be missing. Plywood covered most of the windows on the third floor, and the slate roof had large bald

patches. Crumbling turrets crowned each of the house's corners. It reminded me of a ruined castle.

"It's so beautiful," Camila said reverently as we walked up the front steps. I agreed.

A rusty knocker hung on the front door, but Dad just reached forward and turned the doorknob. Camila and I followed him through a wood-paneled entry hall, past a dark double staircase sailing up beneath a dusty chandelier.

Dad waved us through a side archway into one of the biggest rooms I'd ever seen. It was easily the size of my school cafeteria, with carved stone fireplaces at either end big enough for me and Camila to stand in. The fireplace close to us had been restored to a clean, blue-gray marble, but the far one was still blackened with dirt and soot. In between, the room was buzzing with activity. Workers moved around different tables, sawing, sanding, and nailing. When I spotted my mom at a wide table looking over some blueprints with a man in a hard hat, I felt a burst of pride. I'd always imagined she had a cool job, but actually *seeing* what she was doing suddenly made everything so real.

Mom smiled when she saw us. "Welcome to Coventry House," she said as she headed toward us.

Once Dad left for his appointment, my mother gave me and Camila the grand tour. "The mansion was built in 1894 by a candy-maker named Francis Coventry, for his wife and three daughters," she began. "This hall is known as the Great Room. For the moment, it's our main work area." She led us through the space, weaving around two men moving lumber and a woman chipping rust off an old metal window frame, until we reached an archway that opened onto a long hallway. We followed her down the hall past different rooms. As we came to each one, Mom pointed out details I hadn't noticed, such as a cluster of carved violins crowning the doorway to the music room, and baskets of fruit and a roast goose over the mantel in the dining room. "Coventry wanted his home to be special, so he employed master carvers to decorate each room in a unique way," she said.

The more I looked, the more there was to see. It felt sort of like when I was on the Amazon River, realizing how much there was to see all around me. I thought of what Ms. Garcia had said about looking at things in new ways.

We were about to leave the dining room when Camila stopped at a door. She peered at a brass knob stamped with a curving design that looked familiar. "What is this?" Camila asked Mom, pointing to it.

"That is a *fleur-de-lis*, the symbol of St. Louis," my mom replied. "It was originally a symbol for the King of France, who once owned this whole area."

“It’s a flower, right?” I said, remembering what she had once told me.

Mom nodded. “Yes—‘*fleur*’ means flower. It’s a stylized drawing of a lily or iris. Mr. Coventry wanted them in all the rooms, to remind him of how much wealth the city had given him. Of course, they also represent royalty,” she said, winking, “so he also might have wanted to feel like a king.”

We walked out of the dining room, past a sunlit porch. “After the last of Coventry’s daughters died, the house was sold,” Mom continued. “It was turned into an orphanage, then a girls’ school, and finally a boardinghouse, before it was abandoned. Since then, it’s been vandalized, flooded, and part of it even burned down in a fire. No one wanted it, and the city was thinking about tearing it down.”

“I can’t believe that!” I said, indignant.

“There are a lot of great old buildings that no one wants anymore,” said Mom. “Luckily, people are trying to save them. A few years ago, the Old North St. Louis Preservation Society started raising money to fix Coventry House. They’ve rebuilt many homes in this area, which is great for the neighborhood. The preservation society has teamed up with a private donor to raise enough money to restore Coventry House, so it can become a community center. When the center opens, it will serve the residents already here, and hopefully also make more people want to move to the neighborhood and bring even more houses back to life.”

“Mom,” I said proudly, “*you* are bringing Coventry House back to life!”

“Not just me,” she said, smiling. “A lot of people are working to save this place. Although I do feel I have a personal connection to the house through Ama. This was one of her favorite buildings in St. Louis.”

“Really?” I asked.

Mom nodded. “Ama lived in this neighborhood until she was 14, before they moved to West County.”

I’d never known Ama had lived nearby. It made me wonder what else I didn’t know about her.

As we peeked into another room, I couldn’t help picturing my grandmother here, her compass necklace gleaming around her neck. Ama loved exploring—she would have wanted to explore every nook of this strange, beautiful house.

We passed through an archway and Mom stopped. “Here we are!”

I realized we’d gone all the way around and returned to the front entry hall. The double staircase curved gracefully behind us, but I could see now that rusty metal gates were locked at the top of each set of steps.

“Can we go upstairs?” I asked.

“The second and third floors are still off-limits except to the construction crew,” she said. “But come on, I’ll show you one more thing.”

Mom turned around and moved to a corner of the wood-paneled foyer wall. When she pressed it in, it sprang back, opening like a door!

“Whoa,” I exclaimed as my mother led us into a semicircular room with curved windows. “Coventry’s daughters asked their father for a special room away from servants and guests, where they could relax and read,” she told us. “So he built them this morning room.”

I looked around. Opposite us, a young woman in painter’s overalls stood on a ladder by a strip of wall.

“Camila and Lea, this is Sarah,” Mom said. Sarah pulled her earbuds out and grinned at us. “Sarah studies art restoration at Wash U. She volunteered to help uncover one of Coventry House’s hidden treasures—this mural.” I looked at the wall. Most of the top plaster had been chipped away. Under the cloudy layers that remained, I could see faint, shadowy outlines.

“What is a mural?” asked Camila.

“A wall painting,” answered Mom. “Coventry wrote that he was going to have a mural painted for his daughters. It’s noted in the blueprints. Unfortunately, we have no photographs of it, so we won’t know exactly what it is until Sarah’s finished.”

Just then, the door behind us opened. The man in the hard hat popped his head in.

“There you are,” he said to Mom. “The bank’s on the phone,” he told her. “The donor’s payment is late.”

My mother sighed. “Again?” she said, sounding upset, and then she stopped herself. She turned to us. “I’m sorry, girls. I need to go take this call.”

“Can we stay and watch Sarah work on the mural?” I asked.

Mom nodded. “Just don’t wander off. Come back to the Great Room when you’re done watching.”

After Mom left, we watched Sarah work. She’d pry off bits of plaster with a tiny knife, then use a fan-shaped brush to skim away dust. After a moment, I thought I could see the outline of a girl’s face emerging, with wide eyes and a bow-shaped mouth.

As I strained to look at it, a faint, high-pitched sound came from nearby. *A ghost?* Big old houses are often haunted. I glanced at Camila. From her face, I could tell she’d heard it too. The sound came again, more insistent. It seemed to be coming from behind a nearby door. Camila moved to open the door, but I stopped her.

“Wait.” I bent down, putting my eye to the old-fashioned keyhole. All I

could see was a drab, dusty back hallway—until a small cat with black fur and white paws whisked across it! I gasped. The cat paused. With its skinny legs and giant eyes, it was more of an older kitten than a grown-up cat.

"It's a kitten," I whispered to Camila, but before I could say maybe we should try not to scare it, Camila pushed open the door. In a flash, the kitten bolted down the hall, zipping around a corner.

"Come on!" Camila said, bouncing with excitement.

I glanced back. Sarah had her earbuds in and was facing away from us, but I still felt nervous. "Hold on," I cautioned, but Camila was already a few steps down the hall. "Mom said not to go too far." Still, I was as excited as Camila. I love animals, and what if this kitten needed our help?

In the distance, I heard the tiny mew again. We crept down the dark hall, trying to be quiet. The wood floor was dirty and uneven, and the boards creaked with each step. The walls had rough, splintery holes where plaster had fallen off. Somewhere in front of us, I could hear tiny claws skittering. *The kitten!*

We kept moving. Ahead on the right was a door, slightly ajar. Using one finger, I swung the door open to reveal a pile of old wood planks in a roomy closet. Rusty nails stuck out from some of the boards. Camila leaned over the pile. My excitement turned to fear and I grabbed her arm. "Careful!"

Camila nodded. We eased around the wood, looking for the kitten. Through some gaps in the pile, we spotted the kitten hiding inside. It was black except for its white nose and feet and a pair of golden, terrified eyes. Seeing us, it froze in place and let out the tiniest, cutest hiss in the world.

"*Shhh…*" I told the kitten, trying to calm it, as Camila slowly crouched. But just as she reached her arms toward it, the kitten sprang to the top of the woodpile, leaped off it, and sprinted past us.

"Come on!" I urged, forgetting my fear.

We rushed after it. The black-and-white furball streaked down the hall past a side stairwell and closed doors. It jumped over some old paint cans and slowed, but as we caught up, it veered left, nudging a room door open. Camila and I reached the room, panting.

"There's nowhere left to go," I said. For a second I thought, *I should go get Mom*. But what if the kitten ran away before we came back? I didn't want that. We edged inside. The room was crammed with old furniture and boxes stacked almost to the ceiling. I could hear the kitten scuffling around somewhere near the back.

"Let's try to get on either side of it," I whispered to Camila.

She nodded and we split up. I slipped between unsteady-looking towers of boxes, trying not to bump anything. The kitten sounded closer now. I

peeked around a corner. Through the maze of boxes, I could see the kitten washing its face with a paw as it perched on a grimy windowsill, A thrill ran through me. *Maybe we could actually catch it!*

Camila was edging in slow motion between two boxes. As she got close to the kitten, I realized I was too far away to get to the other side of it in time. I waved to get Camila's attention, but as I did, the kitten saw Camila—and she lunged for it!

It screeched, jumping for the nearest stack of boxes, and caught the edge of a box, holding on for dear life with its claws.

"Oh NO!" I shrieked, as the kitten clawed its way up the stack of boxes. Camila and I screamed, scrambling to dodge boxes as the stack collapsed and dust and papers rained down. I looked up just in time to see the kitten land nimbly inside a hole at the top of the wall and disappear.

Camila and I stood dazed. Old dusty photographs and papers were everywhere, like piles of dirty snow. "We have to clean this up," I said, surveying the mess.

Camila and I hurried to pick everything up, struggling to lift boxes and stuffing papers back into them. She could tell I was upset, because she said, "Don't worry, it was just an accident." She was right, but I knew it was also our fault.

I gathered some papers and photographs up off the floor and sighed, glancing down at a large black-and-white photo on top. In it, a girl a few years older than me posed by a window in a 1950s-style dress. Her face was heart-shaped, and her shoulder-length blonde hair was swept back in sleek waves. I was about to put the photo into a box with the other papers when I saw something that made me stop, stunned.

"What is it?" asked Camila, but I barely heard her.

Hanging around the girl's neck in the picture was my grandmother Ama's compass necklace.

The Necklace

Chapter 4

I squinted at the photograph of the blonde girl. Although it was faint, I could clearly see the delicate flower design on the compass hanging around her neck. It looked *exactly* like Ama's compass. They were identical.

"What is it? What did you find?" said Camila.

I showed her the photo and explained why I was so surprised. Camila examined the girl's picture. "Do you think this is really your grandmother's necklace?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied, turning over the bent, dusty photo. On the back, in small, elegant handwriting, were the words "Hallie. July 12, 1956."

"*Hallie*," I breathed. Questions flooded my brain. Who was Hallie? And why did she have Ama's necklace?

We wove our way back through the maze of hallways to the Great Room. My mom was talking to the man in the hard hat at a worktable. Excited, I showed her the photograph of Hallie.

Mom studied it carefully. "It does look like Ama's necklace," she admitted, "but I doubt it's the same one."

"Why not?" I asked.

"It just seems unlikely," she said, sounding tired.

"Well, did Ama ever talk about someone named Hallie?" I persisted. "Maybe they knew each other."

"I don't think so," Mom said. "Ama never mentioned anyone named Hallie to me, honey. Sorry."

I looked at the photo again. Something about the way Hallie looked boldly into the camera reminded me of Ama. "Can I borrow the photo, Mom?

We found it in one of the storage rooms."

My mother thought for a second. Reaching across to a workstation, she grabbed a clean plastic bag and put the photo inside. "You can borrow it," she said, "as long as you take care of it."

"I promise," I said. She handed the photo to me and I hugged it close, feeling a strange thrill go through me.

At dinner, Camila and I told my parents all about following the kitten and then finding Hallie's photo.

"So you met the Artful Dodger," said Mom.

"That is his name?" asked Camila.

Mom nodded. "He just showed up a few days ago. We think he's living in Coventry House, but we're not quite sure where, mainly because he's so good at running away. That's how Dodger got his name."

"But who owns him?" asked Camila. She looked even more worried when I explained that "stray" meant the Artful Dodger didn't have a family.

"This is terrible!" Camila exclaimed "Lea, we must save Dodger!"

"If you can find him again," my mother noted.

"How was your day?" Dad asked her.

Mom sighed. "Full of the usual problems." She brushed her hair back from her forehead the way she did when she was worried.

"More funding issues?" asked Dad, concerned. Mom nodded.

"The donor's trying to walk back his initial commitment," she said.

"For Coventry House?" I asked. "I thought you had enough money to restore it."

"Unfortunately, for a project like Coventry House, money is always a challenge," Mom explained. "Restoring historic buildings is expensive, and people often want to tear them down because it's easier and cheaper. They don't think about the fact that these buildings are full of unique details and history that make them irreplaceable. Like Ama's journals," she said to me, "only for a whole community instead of one person. Buildings like Coventry House are part of North St. Louis's identity. They're a big part of the neighborhood's past, and that's worth protecting."

After dinner, I checked my e-mail. Zac had sent me some photos of the latest animals he'd helped rescue. There were snapshots of a giant armadillo, a monkey with a broken arm, and a pair of baby macaws. The macaws' wrinkled skin made them look like little old men, although parts of their bodies were starting to sprout green and blue feathers, and they had big black eyes. They were so cute! Zac said they'd been been rescued after their mother had disappeared—probably stolen by poachers.

> The farther you go into the rainforest, the more poaching is a problem. Poachers kill, trap, and smuggle animals out of the country. We've been working to protect the local populations, but it's not easy. The baby animals we rescue have to be raised by hand at the sanctuary, and even if they can be released back into the wild, they'll be in danger again.

It was inspiring to know how hard my brother was working to protect the animals, but troubling to think of these problems. I told Zac about how Camila and I had found Dodger. *We're going to rescue him, but first we have to find him again,* I wrote. I considered telling Zac about the photo of Hallie, but I hesitated. It seemed too complicated to tell about in an e-mail, and besides, I didn't really know anything about her. I needed to find out more first.

While Camila brushed her teeth and got ready for bed, I looked at Hallie's photo with my dad's old magnifying glass. Under the magnifying glass, the eight pointed petals were clearly visible on the compass, exactly as they were on Ama's compass.

My grandmother had never told me how she got her necklace. Were there lots of compasses just like this one in St. Louis back when Ama was young? *It can't be just a coincidence,* I thought. *Can it?*

"Maybe tomorrow we can go back to Coventry House and try to catch Dodger," said Camila, coming into my bedroom in her nightgown.

I nodded, still looking at the photo.

"I want to see the big Arch up close. Maybe tomorrow?" Camila said eagerly.

"Don't worry, we'll probably go there for photography class," I assured her.

I returned to Hallie's photo, searching for clues. Although the photo was black and white, I could tell that Hallie had blonde hair and dark eyes. Her pale dress had an elegant sheen, like silk, and her hands, in short white

gloves, rested on a dark sash at her trim waist. Ama's necklace shimmered around her neck, and she had a fresh flower fastened to her bodice with a pin in the shape of a fleur-de-lis.

Hallie stood before a tall window. Its long rectangular panels of glass fitted together in a series of angles that reminded me of a cut crystal's facets. The corners of her mouth turned up in a small, bold smile that made it look like she had a secret. She reminded me of a photo I'd once seen of the old movie star Grace Kelly, poised and perfect.

The longer I looked at the photo, the more questions I had about Hallie —and the more I couldn't wait to start seaching for answers.

The next morning, after we found seats together on the van for our first photography field trip, Camila and I told Abby about our discoveries.

"It could be hard to find out anything about Hallie," said Abby. "The photo's so old, and you don't even know her last name."

"I think it'll be fun to figure out who she is!" I said. "Like solving a puzzle."

"We must also rescue Dodger," Camila added.

Abby perked up. "I can help you with that! I always help out at my mom's veterinary clinic when cats get scared. Mom says I'm a cat whisperer." Camila and Abby started talking about cats and how to catch them. "I *know* I can catch Dodger," Abby boasted. "Lea, let's ask your mom if I can come to Coventry House too."

"I'm not sure if we'll be able to visit again," I said. "My mom's really busy there." Camila looked crestfallen.

"Oh, well," said Abby. "So, Camila, what else do you want to do while you're here?"

Camila lit up. "I want to see the Mississippi River, and the Arch…"

"You haven't been to the Arch yet?" said Abby, amazed. "You *have* to go there! And you have to go to Six Flags, and Grant's Farm, and City Museum —oh, and you need to try frozen custard from Ted Drewes. It's the most delicious thing on earth. Right, Lea?"

I nodded. I was going to add that we needed to find Hallie first, but Abby kept talking about frozen custard until the van rolled to a stop.

Ms. Garcia stood up in the aisle. "Okay, photographers!" she chirped. "Welcome to our first urban exploration. Today we're going to be taking pictures of the Soulard Market. Some of you may have been here before, but

that's okay—if you're paying attention, you can always find something new to look at, even in a place you know well."

I recognized the pretty redbrick building in front of us. "This market," Ms. Garcia told us, "has been here for more than a century, so there are plenty of interesting things to photograph."

We followed Ms. Garcia up to the arched front entrance and through the double doors. Inside, endless rows of stalls filled the hall, displaying fresh vegetables, meats, fruits, and flowers. "Please stay inside the market area," Ms. Garcia called after us. "We'll meet at the front entrance in thirty minutes. Have fun!"

The class spread out, cameras poised. Camila headed down an aisle, snapping pictures, with Abby a few steps behind her.

I stood still, remembering what Ms. Garcia had told us about trying to see in a new way. I looked around and then took a few photos of oranges piled in a pyramid. But when I checked my shots, they all looked sort of dull. The last thing I wanted to hear was Ms. Garcia saying that I'd taken another boring photo.

I glanced around again. Camila and Abby had disappeared into the sea of shoppers. For a moment, I felt nervous and wondered if I should go try to find them. Yet a voice inside me said, *No. Focus on what's in front of you.* It sounded like something Ama would say. I took a deep, calming breath and slowly made my way down an aisle, making sure I didn't miss anything.

I'd been coming to Soulard Market with my family a few times a year ever since I could remember. Still, as I raised my camera up and looked through the lens, I began noticing things I hadn't seen before, like how the sunlight streamed onto the polished, swirly gray-green floor, and how the iron lampposts at the end of each row of stalls were standing guard. I started snapping photographs, trying to capture the images.

I turned a corner. At the end of the next aisle was a bright stall with a yellow-and-pink-striped awning. The Flaky Bakery was one of Ama's favorite shops. We would go there whenever we came to the market together. Sadness washed over me like an ocean wave. For a brief moment, I could almost see Ama there, nose pressed to the cupcake display, her compass necklace swinging. "Vanilla with chocolate frosting?" she'd ask me, "or chocolate with vanilla?" Then, before I could answer, she'd say, "Why choose? Let's have both." Just thinking about it made me smile.

I stepped up to the display case. Pastel cupcakes stood in neat rows behind the gleaming glass, their pink, blue, and lavender whipped-frosting tops making them look like sugary spring flowers. Without thinking, I lifted my camera and focused on the colorful cupcakes, zooming closer as I shot.

Happiness bloomed inside me. Taking photos always made me feel better.

I didn't realize I'd spent a half hour shooting cupcakes, but when I checked the wall clock, it was time to meet the class. As I came out the front doors, our van was by the curb and Abby and Camila were comparing shots nearby.

Camila saw me first. "Did you see the horses? They were huge!" she blurted.

"Clydesdales, they were Clydesdales!" said Abby, as they both rushed over. Abby showed me a few photos of Camila petting a team of draft horses yoked to a wagon, laughing, and even kissing one of their noses.

"I can't believe you missed them!" Abby said. She and Camila kept talking about the horses, noting how huge but gentle they were, and how soft. Excitedly, they showed me the rest of their photos. Most were of Camila or Abby making faces for the camera and having fun. All their shots were bursting with life. By comparison, my photos seemed dull.

"What did you photograph, Lea?" Camila asked.

"Just some cupcakes," I said. I waited for them to ask to see my pictures, but they didn't.

Camila and Abby sat together on the way back. I was one seat behind them next to Kevin, who wanted to show me all the photos he'd taken of the sausages at Eddie's Meats. "Sweet apple, sun-dried tomato, spinach feta," he said proudly, clicking through his photos. It seemed as if he had taken a million of them. "Italian is my favorite. But look at this one…and this one…"

I nodded politely as I tried to overhear what Camila and Abby were talking about.

"I love horses," Camila was saying. "In Brazil, you can ride them on the beach!"

"That sounds so fun," said Abby. "I *have* to come visit you now!"

"Yes!" Camila agreed, sounding happy. I caught a snippet of Abby telling her how she'd taught her dog to play soccer before I finally gave up trying to eavesdrop and started looking at my photos. Cupcakes. Lots of cupcakes.

Kevin leaned over. "Hey," he said, appraising my shots. "Looks like you like cupcakes as much as I love sausages!"

I gave him a weak smile.

Once we got out of the van at COCA, Abby ran up to me. "Hey, Lea,

would you mind if Camila came over after camp today?"

"If your dad says it's okay," added Camila.

"We want to play soccer in my backyard," Abby bubbled. She turned to Camila. "I have a net and everything. And you can help feed Tiny—he's the newborn puppy my mom is fostering. I'll ask her, but now that he's getting bigger, I'm sure she'll say it's okay."

I felt a sharp pang of jealousy. I'd been *begging* Abby to let me help feed Tiny, or even *hold* him. All I'd been allowed to do so far was look at him in his shoebox.

"Lea," said Abby, "I know you're not into soccer, so I don't know if you want to come, but you can if you want."

"I can't," I said curtly. "I have to go through Ama's journals to see if she mentioned Hallie."

Abby looked confused. "Can't you do that another time?"

I shook my head. "I should do it soon, before I have to return the photograph."

I was hoping that either Camila or Abby would offer to help, but Abby just shrugged. "Okay," she said, adding, "We'll miss you."

"Yes," Camila said. I could tell they were trying to be kind, but somehow that didn't make me feel any better.

That afternoon, while Dad was taking Camila to Abby's house, I dug out Ama's travel journals. Mom had put most of Ama's mementos in boxes in the attic, but I'd kept the journals in my bookcase after we got home from Brazil. Now, I stacked the four worn leather books on the window seat, curled up on the old velvet cushion, and started to read. The first time I'd opened my grandmother's journals, on the plane ride to Brazil, I had read them for hours. But today it was hard to stay focused. I kept thinking about how much fun Camila and Abby were probably having, even when I reminded myself that they were just playing soccer while I was searching for important clues about Hallie and the compass necklace.

Ama's first journal started in 1996. She talked about all the adventures she was having in Hawaii and then Bali. Even though I'd read it before, it was still interesting. Unfortunately, she didn't talk about her past at all, and there was no mention of anyone named Hallie. After reading for over an hour, I started to wonder if this was a waste of time. Midway through the second journal, Ama was traveling through Siberia on a bicycling trip. She described

stopping for lunch by a field of irises:

> *They reminded me (of course!) of St. Louis, of my favorite flower, copper irises, and my compass necklace, and of that promise I made when I was sixteen—and how far I've come since then.*

I sat up. *That promise I made when I was sixteen*—What was she talking about? Ama had never told me of any special promises she had made involving her compass necklace. To whom had she made a promise? Could it have been Hallie? And *what* had she promised? Whatever it was, the promise must have been very important for her to remember it so many years later.

I read the rest of the journal as fast as I could, looking for any mention of Hallie or the compass necklace, but there was nothing else. There was no mention of them in the third journal, either. By the time I started the last one, my eyes were tired from staring at the pages, but I kept going. Finally, I got to where my own diary entries started. I turned to the most recent entry.

> *CAMILA IS ARRIVING AND I AM SO EXCITED! Can you tell? :) I can't wait to see her again, and show her all the great things about St. Louis!*

Reading those words now suddenly made me feel a little sad.

I looked up. Hickory Street was dark outside the window. I'd missed the chance to spend an afternoon with Camila, and I still had no idea how I was going to find Hallie.

The Jewel Box

Chapter 5

When Camila and I got to COCA the next morning, Ms. Garcia was already waiting with the rest of the class by the van.

Abby rushed up as we approached. “Guess what? We’re going to take pictures at Forest Park today!” she said.

Excitement raced through me. Forest Park is one of the best parts of St. Louis. It’s huge and packed with a zillion things to see, like the planetarium and the zoo. “Maybe we’ll go to Turtle Playground,” I told Camila. “They have these giant cement turtle sculptures. Hey, they’re sort of like the big wooden turtle sculptures at the sea turtle sanctuary in Praia Tropical!”

Camila nodded, her eyes lit with recognition. She lived in Praia Tropical, so she’d been to Amigos do Oceano, the sea turtle sanctuary, many times.

Abby popped up behind us. “You have to see the Muny!” she said to Camila, as we climbed into the van. “It’s this big theater that puts on free musicals in the summer, and we all go and watch and eat a picnic dinner. It’s so much fun.”

When we took our seats, Abby started telling Camila all about the Muny. I noticed that Camila had done her hair in two high mini buns, just like Abby. I pulled my backpack onto my knees. Inside, in a folder wrapped carefully in a plastic bag, was the photo of Hallie. I’d brought it with me to show Abby, but somehow it seemed awkward to mention it right now, especially when Abby started taking pictures of Camila and making her laugh.

Before I knew it, the van pulled up to the park’s main entrance. Ms. Garcia turned around in the front seat to face us. “Okay, photographers!” she said, grinning. “Forest Park is one of the best places to take pictures in St. Louis, and today we’ll be visiting my all-time favorite spot, so make sure you’re paying attention.”

We followed Ms. Garcia into the park. Rolling green lawn stretched out so far in front of us, I couldn’t see where it ended. Ms. Garcia moved quickly

down one path and across to another. Soon we were approaching the World's Fair Pavilion, with its tumbling stone waterfall in front.

"Is that where we're going?" Kevin asked. Ms. Garcia just smiled and shook her head.

We passed a glassy lake outlined by purple-leaf plum trees. On a tiny island in the center stood Forest Park's circular bandstand. With its elaborate details and blue-green copper dome, it reminded me of a frozen carousel. I remembered seeing it a few summers ago with Abby, when we went to an outdoor performance of *The Wizard of Oz* at the Muny. I was about to remind Abby about it, but when I looked around, she and Camila were far away.

The path crested up steeply, and we panted, struggling to get to the top. As we did, another building came into view, glittering in the sunlight. Except for a few metal bars and a stone entrance, it looked like it was made entirely of glass. I had to run to catch up to Camila and Abby.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ms. Garcia said dramatically, "welcome to the St. Louis Floral Conservatory, also known as the Jewel Box."

"It *does* look like a jewel box," whispered Camila, and she was right. The building's tiers of windows, stair-stepping roof, and metal double doors seemed like an elaborate case for treasures. The closer we got, the more light bounced off the glass, until it felt like we were walking into a giant diamond. I'd been here before, and every time I saw it again, I had the same reaction—I wanted to take a picture.

Inside, colorful spring flowers like roses, lilies, and daffodils overflowed long beds and crowded displays. I stopped to breathe in the sweet perfume. A tour guide with steel-gray hair swept up in a tight bun introduced herself. She motioned for us to follow her down the center aisle as she told us about the building.

"Since it was completed in 1936, the Jewel Box has become one of the world's most famous decorative greenhouses," she lectured. "At any given time, hundreds of rare and ornamental plants are on display, none of which are to be touched—*ever*." She gave us all a stern look to make her point.

Ms. Garcia stepped up. "Yes! Thank you! I know my students are going to be very respectful," she said brightly. "Now, guys," said Ms. Garcia, turning to us, "the Jewel Box and these plants were *made* to be photographed. With all the natural light and beautiful flowers, it's impossible to take a bad picture here. So relax, let your imaginations run wild, and *keep seeing in a new way*."

I looked around. The class was scattering fast. Abby and Camila were already snapping shots of the clusters of ruby tulips lining the long center fountain. As they leaned their heads together, I couldn't help admiring their

matching mini buns. When Abby said something to Camila that I couldn't hear, they broke into giggles. I pulled out my camera, trying to ignore the feeling of being left out.

Above me, sunlight streamed through the line of glass windows. I snapped some shots of sunbeams hitting a wall of climbing roses, but when I checked the camera, the roses looked washed-out. Frustrated, I moved down the path, back toward the front entrance. On my right was a space where several long, rectangular glass windows met in a corner. I paused. Looking at it gave me a strange feeling—it looked familiar, but I didn't know why. At first it made me think of the square, cut-glass crystal vase my mom sometimes puts flowers in. Then it hit me: *It looked like the background of Hallie's photo.*

I unzipped my backpack, pulled out the photo, and compared it with the real-life corner in front of me. Sure enough, Hallie was standing in her silk dress, wearing the compass necklace, in front of the *exact spot* I was looking at.

This is where Hallie's photo was taken! I nearly burst with excitement.

Camila and Abby were a little confused when I raced up, blathering, "Hallie! The photo! It happened here! You guys have to come, quick!" Neither seemed that interested until I showed them the photo side by side with the corner and they saw what I saw.

"This was definitely taken here," said Abby, studying the photo.

Camila looked at me, her eyes shining. "What should we do now, Lea?"

"We need to find out *why* Hallie was here," I said.

I wasn't sure if the grumpy tour guide could help me, but she was the only person I could think of to ask.

She was intrigued by the photograph. "Yes," she said, looking at the date on the back. "This photo was taken here. The Jewel Box hosted frequent debutante balls throughout 1956."

"*Deb-you-tante?*" asked Camila, confused. "What is that?"

"Several decades ago, wealthy families in St. Louis would hold a ball, or dance, where girls turning sixteen would enter society," said the tour guide.

Abby frowned. "I don't understand," she said.

"I don't either," I admitted. "Aren't they already *in* society?"

"Not *officially*," replied the tour guide, letting go of an impatient sigh.

Now I was even more confused. Judging from their expressions, so were

Camila and Abby.

"What does it mean, '*in society*'?" asked Camila.

Exasperated, the tour guide turned to Ms. Garcia, who'd been listening from a few feet away.

"At that time, 'society' was a word used to mean wealthy and well-known families in the city," Ms. Garcia told us. She came over and looked at the photograph of Hallie, glancing at the note on the back. "In 1956, women didn't have the same opportunities to be educated or pursue careers that we have now. A debutante ball was where well-to-do young ladies were formally introduced to young men," she said, adding, "In some families, girls were expected to simply look pretty and get married. Hallie may have done that."

I felt a flash of stubborn annoyance. "I don't think so," I said. Looking at the compass—and the way Hallie boldly stared at the camera—reminded me again of Ama somehow. "I think Hallie wanted to travel and explore," I said.

Ms. Garcia looked amused. "How do you know that?" she said.

"It's just a hunch," I replied. "Also, she's wearing my grandmother Ama's compass necklace."

"It *looks* like Ama's compass," said Abby, "but it might not be the same exact one. Maybe they both just bought it at the same store, separately."

I knew Abby could be right. Still, it bothered me to hear her say it. I might not have been able to prove it, but I felt sure it was Ama's compass. Wasn't that enough for Abby to believe me?

We all stared at the photo. My eyes fell on the flower pinned to Hallie's dress. It was shaped like a lily, but smaller, and its six long petals stood out from one another like a star.

"What's this called?" I asked, pointing to it.

"That's called a corsage," said Ms. Garcia.

"No, I mean what kind of flower is it?" I said.

The tour guide squinted at the photo. "It's hard to tell since the photo is in black and white, but from the size and shape I'd say it's a copper iris."

The name made my heart stop. Just last night in Ama's journal, I'd read that copper irises were her favorite kind of flower! *That can't be a coincidence*, I thought.

"They're native to Missouri," the guide went on. "They're small, but they have a very distinct appearance, quite unique—like this." She walked us to another area of the greenhouse and pointed to a clump of irises growing beside a small fountain. The blossoms were much smaller than the yellow and purple flag irises I was used to seeing at this time of year, and their color was unusual and striking, coppery-red with gold accents.

“I want to find out who Hallie is,” I told her.

“If I were you,” said the guide, “I’d go look in the city archives at the main library downtown. That’s where we keep all of our historical papers for the Floral Conservatory. If an event was held here on July 12, 1956, they might have a record of it.”

Over dinner that night, Camila and I told my parents the latest chapter in what I was now calling “The Hunt for Hallie.”

“It sounds like you two had an interesting day,” my dad said as he scooped mashed potatoes onto his plate.

“It was more than just *interesting*, Dad,” I said. “This is important new information! Maybe Ama and Hallie were debutantes together?”

“I don’t think so.” Mom took a bite of salad. She hadn’t said much during my retelling of the day’s adventures.

“Why not?” I asked. “Maybe Ama was at the Jewel Box that night, too!”

“Honey, there’s no way Ama was a debutante,” my mother said. “Her parents wouldn’t have had the money to pay for an expensive dress. They were immigrants. Anyway, they didn’t believe in that type of thing. They would have thought it was frivolous.”

“What does ‘frivolous’ mean?” asked Camila.

“Silly, or wasteful,” said my mother. “Besides, by the summer of 1956, my grandfather—Ama’s father—had already moved the whole family out of St. Louis to West County,” Mom went on. “Ama was working at the family grocery store and studying. She wasn’t going to debutante balls. I think the whole necklace thing is just a coincidence.”

“Well, it still can’t hurt to go to the library tomorrow and check,” I said, persisting.

When the phone in the hall rang, Dad went to answer it. He returned looking surprised.

“It’s for you, Camila,” he said. “It’s Abby.”

Abby? Calling for *Camila* and not me? Hurt feelings welled in my throat, but I tried not to show them. Instead, I studied my peas and pork chops while Camila talked on the phone. When she came back in, her eyes were sparkling.

“Abby invited me to go with her to a baseball game!” Camila said. “Yesterday I mentioned that I would like to see the St. Louis Cardinals play, and Abby’s father has an extra ticket for tomorrow!”

“That’s fantastic!” Dad said. “You have to go.”

“Of course you do,” said Mom. “It’ll be a memorable experience. You girls will have so much fun!”

“Yes,” Camila said, looking at me nervously, “but Abby says her father has only one extra ticket.”

I bit my lip.

“That’s okay,” Dad said, trying to smooth over the awkwardness. “You’re not the biggest sports fan anyway, are you, Lea?”

I shrugged, looking down at my plate.

“While you two are at the game, Lea and I can hit the library,” Dad continued, “and resume The Hunt for Hallie.”

Camila looked at me, concerned. “Are you sure, Lea?”

I wasn’t, actually. It’s true that I don’t love sports, but I *also* didn’t love the idea of Camila and Abby having a fun time without me. I realized with surprise that I was a little jealous that Abby had asked Camila and not me. Still, I didn’t want to make Camila feel bad. So instead I said, “You should go. You’ll have a great time.”

Camila smiled with relief.

I smiled back at her. But inside I still felt awful.

The Library

Chapter 6

Dear Journal,

It's past my bedtime, but I can't sleep. I keep thinking about Camila and Abby. They're getting along so well, which is great, because they're both my friends. So why don't I feel more excited that they want to spend time together?

Normally when I have a problem I talk to Abby. But I can't talk to her about this!

Sometimes Zac has good advice, but with everything that he's dealing with in Brazil, I don't want to bother him. I'm worried about Zac. Part of me wishes he would come home, but I know he's working to protect the animals. Still, I don't like thinking about him being in any kind of danger.

Since I can't talk to anyone about Abby and Camila, I'm going to focus on finding out more about Hallie. I just can't shake the feeling that there's some link between Hallie and Ama.

"Look alive, Lea," my dad teased. I was lagging behind as we climbed the wide marble front steps to the Central Library entrance. We go to our local library a lot, but we hadn't come downtown to the main branch in a while. I'd forgotten how huge the elegant granite building was…and how many steps it had!

“What floor are the archives on again?” I asked, out of breath, as we moved through the entrance.

“Fourth,” he replied.

“Is there an elevator?”

“We don’t need an elevator! You climbed a mountain in Brazil—twice in one day, remember?” Dad said. “Besides, it’s great therapy for my leg,” he added.

“What’s an archive, anyway?” I asked, panting a bit as we scaled the last flight of stairs.

“It’s a place that keeps historical records and papers,” he explained. “The records can’t be checked out like library books, but people can still visit to look at them.”

It sounded sort of like a museum, but when we reached the archive, its low light and leather chairs reminded me more of a cozy study. Unfortunately, when my father told the archive librarian what we needed, her smile faded.

“I’m so sorry,” she said regretfully. “Our records for the Floral Conservatory don’t begin until 1982. A storage fire destroyed everything before that. You’re welcome to look at any of the other photos and records we have,” she added, maybe because I looked so disappointed.

“Is there anything else that you want to look at while we’re here, Lea?” Dad asked.

“Do you have any old photos of Coventry House?” I asked the librarian. “That’s where we found Hallie’s photo,” I told her. “Maybe there’s a clue there.”

We sat at a polished dark wood table. Soon, the librarian brought over several boxes full of antique photos, each covered in protective plastic. Carefully, Dad and I sifted through them. There were sepia pictures of Coventry House being built, with Francis Coventry posing proudly on the front steps, with his daughters in a horse-drawn carriage out front. Dad found a long photo of a large group of children sitting on the front steps, from when the house was an orphanage. There were even a few photos from after the house had been abandoned, with its windows broken. They were all interesting, but none of them offered any clue about Hallie.

And yet her photo had been stored at Coventry House, so there had to be a connection. Could Hallie possibly have been a granddaughter of Francis Coventry’s? It didn’t seem very likely that she was an orphan.

I turned over a big photo. Unlike most of the other pictures of Coventry House, this one was in color. I could tell it was spring from the buds on the trees. The blue sky was bright behind the turrets, but what caught my attention were the tall rust-colored flowers lining the neat path to the front

door. I knew instantly what they were.

“Copper irises!” I said, excitement making my voice loud. The librarian shot us a glance. I lowered my voice and leaned toward Dad.

“Copper irises were Ama’s favorite flower. And Hallie wore one as a corsage in her photo!” I told him.

“Okay,” Dad said, looking a little confused. “So what does that mean?”

I have no idea, I realized. “I don’t know, but it means *something*,” I insisted stubbornly. Somehow Hallie, Ama, the compass necklace, and the irises were all connected, I felt sure of it. I just had to figure out how.

On the way home, I tried to think of ways Hallie and Ama could have known each other. “Maybe they were both gardeners?” I said.

Dad chuckled. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “Your grandmother had many talents, but she did not have a green thumb.”

I sighed, slumping back in my seat.

“Keep going,” Dad encouraged me. “A true explorer doesn’t give up if things aren’t going well.”

I knew he was right, but now that the excitement of discovering the photo of irises at Coventry House had worn off, I was feeling a little discouraged. As I looked out the window, my thoughts drifted from Hallie and Ama to Abby and Camila at the baseball game. They were probably eating popcorn and frozen custard and laughing at jokes that they wouldn’t remember to tell me. Suddenly, my copper iris discovery didn’t seem so important.

“How do you like having Camila here?” Dad asked.

I was startled. Normally Mom’s the one with the freaky ability to read my mind, not Dad.

“Um…it’s okay,” I said.

“Just okay?” he said.

“It’s different from what I expected,” I added after a moment.

Dad considered this. “You know, in my experience, when something’s different from what you expect, it can sometimes turn out to be even *better* than you expected—as long as you keep an open mind about it.”

“Okay,” I said, and turned on the radio to fill the awkward silence. I didn’t really want to talk with him about it. I was already trying not to think about it.

As we pulled into our driveway, Camila ran out to meet us. I barely recognized her. “STL” was painted on her cheeks in red and white, and she was wearing a Cardinals baseball cap and waving a big red foam finger that said “#1” on it. Her face flushed with happiness.

Mom had to work late, so we ordered pizza. Over dinner, Camila told me and Dad how she and Abby had gotten their faces painted at Busch Stadium, and sat behind home plate and done the wave every time St. Louis scored. Plus, the guy next to them caught a foul ball, and gave it to Camila when he found out she was visiting from Brazil. It sounded a lot more fun than my day.

Camila turned to me. “Did you learn anything new about Hallie at the library?”

“Not really,” I said, picking a mushroom off my pizza and nibbling it.

“Hey, that’s not quite true,” said Dad. He told Camila about the photo of the irises outside Coventry House.

“It is another clue!” Camila said enthusiastically. “I am sure you will find Hallie!”

“I hope so,” I replied, trying to share her confidence. *Maybe the problem is that I’m trying to do this on my own*, I thought. It was always more inspiring—and more fun—to have a partner. I turned to Camila, but just as I was about to ask if she and Abby could help me, Camila remembered that it was time for her to video-chat with her cousin Paloma in Brazil.

Twenty minutes later, she was still in front of the computer screen, shaking the #1 finger at Paloma and talking animatedly in Portuguese. *I’ll ask her tomorrow*, I told myself, but as I climbed the stairs, I felt more discouraged than ever.

My journal was lying on the bed. I picked it up and then got under the covers, burrowing in. I fished a pen out of my nightstand and started writing. I didn’t even write “Dear Journal.” I just put down everything I was feeling in that moment.

Maybe I’ll never figure out who Hallie was. And Camila and Abby might not even want to help me at all. They’re too busy having fun without me.

I turned my head. On the nightstand was one of my favorite photos of Ama, beaming with a Masai guide in front of Mount Kilimanjaro in Kenya. Her face shone with confidence. I longed to talk to her. I knew she would

understand. Usually, looking at that photo made me happy, but this time all I could see was how far away Ama seemed.

City Museum

Chapter 7

On our way to camp the next morning, Dad mentioned he'd be giving Abby a ride to our house after camp. "Her mom has to work late at the veterinary clinic, and her dad's at a conference," he explained. "Besides, I figured you three girls would want to hang out after camp anyway. This way, you don't have to waste time asking if Abby can come over," he added with a wink.

I smiled, but inside I felt a twinge of worry. Ever since Camila arrived, things between Abby and me had been kind of odd. I was glad that the two of them were hitting it off, but when Abby had invited Camila to go to the Cardinals game with her, she hadn't even bothered to check if I wanted to come, too. Just thinking about that hurt my feelings all over again.

I was hoping I'd get a moment to talk to Abby about it on our own before camp started, but when Dad rolled into the parking lot, everyone except us was already boarding the class van. After we got in, Ms. Garcia told the class we were going to City Museum. We all got really excited, except for Camila, who looked curious.

"What is City Museum?" she asked.

"The MOST amazingly weird place in all of St. Louis," I told her. "Possibly in the *world*," added Abby.

We looked at each other knowingly, and for that brief moment I felt close to her again.

When we got to the museum, Camila finally understood what we meant. There is nothing subtle about City Museum, from the school bus teetering on the edge of the roof, to the giant crane with two half-finished airplanes hanging from it next to a medieval stone tower—and that's just *outside*! Inside it's even crazier. There's the 10 Story Slide made of old metal mail chutes that spirals from the top floor of the building all the way down to the ground. For those unafraid of heights, there are twisting metal tunnels that

extend across the building in midair for people to climb through. Camila paled when she saw those.

More to her liking were the caves covered in broken mirror pieces, and signs directing you to “The World’s Largest Underpants!” The whole place is like someone’s hyper imagination exploded into reality.

As the class headed through the lobby, everyone kept bumping into one another as we tried to take in everything at once. “This entire museum is a work of art,” Ms. Garcia told us. “Almost everything you see has been thrown away, then rediscovered and given new life as part of a ride or exhibit.” Her eyes sparkled as she looked around. “City Museum itself is the definition of seeing the world in a new way, so it should be easy for you to take some unique photographs here.”

We had forty-five minutes to take pictures. I headed to the roof. Beside the school bus hanging off the roof’s edge, there was a giant dome, and an old-fashioned Ferris wheel. I was trying to capture the color and action around me—like the excited kids and adults running around discovering creativity at every turn. Here, the impossible seemed totally normal.

I spent a lot of time waiting for the right moment to take pictures. After half a dozen shots, I scrolled back through my pictures. There were some good details, but none of them really captured the rush of energy I felt. Instead, they just looked jumbled, like I didn’t know what I wanted to photograph. It was frustrating. I didn’t feel like I was “seeing in a new way” at all.

I came back inside, disappointed. Camp would be ending in a few days. If I didn’t improve, maybe it was a sign that I wasn’t really that good at photography after all. Who had I been trying to kid?

My eyes drifted across the room. Camila was standing alone by the entrance to the 10 Story Slide, watching kids walk in.

“Camila!” I said. “What are you doing up here?”

“Oh, Lea,” she said, looking happy to see me. “Abby is insisting that I go down the slide, because it is the most fun thing to do here. But when I went to the entrance and looked down…” She shivered. “Abby has already gone down,” she said, twisting her long hair tightly around a finger. “I want to go too, but I don’t think I can do it.”

“Sure you can!” I said. “Once you start, it goes really fast, so you’ll be at the bottom before you know it. Besides, being a *little* scared is part of what makes it fun.” I was trying to reassure her, but she looked even more anxious. “You know what my grandmother Ama always said?” I added, hoping to encourage her. “She said, ‘I’m not fearless, but I don’t let my fears *stop* me.’ Camila, if you really want to go down the slide, don’t let being afraid stop

you."

"Your grandmother was brave," Camila said, but her eyes still looked worried.

"Do you want me to go with you?" I offered.

Camila looked surprised, and then she nodded. "Yes!" she said, adding, "But you go in front."

The entrance to the 10 Story Slide was steep, and when I peered in, all I could see was blackness twisting downward. I sat down, and Camila sat behind me, hugging my waist with both hands. In the distance, we could hear the echo of kids screaming with frightened delight as they wound their way down toward the bottom. For a second, I wished I could see what was ahead, and I felt a delicious tingle of fear. I turned and glanced back at Camila. Her eyes were squeezed tightly closed. Suddenly I had an idea. Pulling out my camera, I told Camila I was going to take some pictures as we went down.

"Okay," she said, her eyes still clamped shut.

"Ready?" I asked. Camila nodded and gripped my shoulders hard. "One, two, THREE!" I shouted, and we launched ourselves down the slide.

Metal spun by above me. Camila was shrieking, but she sounded more thrilled than afraid. As the sides of the slide flew by, I held my camera in front of me and pressed the shutter button down and held it, so burst mode kicked in. I looked upside down at Camila, and took a photo of her screaming and laughing at the same time. I kept pressing the button until we flew out the end of the slide and onto some giant beanbags, breathless.

Camila went down the slide three more times after our first ride, all by herself. "They must build one just like it in Brazil!" she exclaimed as the van pulled away from City Museum. It made me feel warm inside to think that I'd helped Camila face her fear of heights.

I felt even better when I started looking through the photographs I'd taken on the slide. Most of the shots were blurry or showed nothing but darkness, since the slide was a tunnel of metal twists and turns, but one photo was a strange combination of Camila's face and the darkness surrounding her. The camera flash made Camila's eyes shine in a spooky way, and her expression was a jumble of joy and fear. I'd never taken a photo that looked like that before. That afternoon, Ms. Garcia taught us how to crop photos, fix red-eye, airbrush, and shift color in Photoshop. She walked around as we worked at our computers, looking at our pictures and offering suggestions. When she saw the photo I'd taken of Camila on the slide, she stopped.

"Wow," she said. "You were *on* the slide when you took that?"

I nodded.

Ms. Garcia folded her arms, impressed. "So did the photo turn out the

way you expected?”

“I didn’t really know what to expect,” I confessed. “I think that’s why I like it so much.”

“That’s a great thing to realize,” Ms. Garcia said, nodding. “Sometimes the best photographs we take come from experimenting, and not being afraid to try new ways of using the camera. This photograph shows real creativity, Lea. You approached taking the photo in a new way, and you really captured all the emotions people feel when they go down the slide.

“Not only that, but your photo made *me* feel fear and joy, too. Keep it up,” she said, and gave me a pat on the shoulder. I felt tingly and happy as she walked off. Maybe by “seeing in a new way,” Ms. Garcia wasn’t talking about what was in front of my eyes, but how I thought about what I saw. In any case, I felt like I’d made a breakthrough. Now, if only I could somehow have a breakthrough and figure out the mystery of Hallie.

After class, Abby, Camila, and I waited outside COCA for Dad to pick us up. Abby pulled out a piece of scratch paper, crumpled it up, and started bouncing it on her knees, practicing her soccer moves. I watched for a few minutes. I had been waiting most of the day for Abby to ask me how my search for Hallie was going, but she still hadn’t, so I decided to mention it.

“Um, so, I was thinking we could go back to the archives and look through their photos for Hallie,” I suggested. “Maybe we can find something new.”

Abby shrugged and kept bouncing the paper ball on her knees. It was getting sort of annoying. “Maybe,” she said, passing the paper ball to Camila using the side of her foot.

Camila bounced it back. “I think we should go to Coventry House,” she said. “We can see Dodger.”

“Yes!” Abby chimed in. She kicked the paper ball back to Camila. “That’s what we should do!”

“I don’t think we have time,” I said as I watched them pass the ball back and forth. “We need to work on finding Hallie.”

“We can do that another day,” said Abby, without looking at me. “Let’s ask your dad to take us to Coventry House. Then I can use my cat-whispering skills to save Dodger.”

I felt myself getting upset. Abby wasn’t listening to me. Neither was Camila, because she clapped her hands and said, “Yes!” She turned to me. “Lea, will you ask your dad?”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to be mean, but I *really* wanted to keep trying to find Hallie. “Does it have to be today?” I asked.

Abby caught her paper ball and turned to me. “Of course it does! Dodger is a *stray*. At any moment he could be hurt or run over. He needs our help.”

She said it as if I didn’t *want* to help Dodger, which bothered me even more. “Abby, just because you *think* you can get Dodger to come to you doesn’t mean you *will*.”

Abby crossed her arms over her chest, the way she does whenever someone tells her she can’t do something. “Just because you’re trying to find Hallie doesn’t mean *you* will,” she retorted.

I gasped. It felt as if she’d just pushed me, hard. I looked from Abby to Camila, who was watching with round eyes. “That was mean,” I said, my voice quavering.

Abby uncrossed her arms. “I just meant that it’s kind of a long shot,” she said more softly.

“What do you think, Camila?” I asked.

Camila looked from Abby to me. “I am not sure,” she said uncomfortably.

I felt my lower lip start to tremble. I’d been hoping Camila would defend me, but I could see that wasn’t going to happen.

“Lea, why are you upset?” asked Camila. She looked worried.

“Yes, why?” asked Abby, which just made it worse. Suddenly everything I’d been feeling and wanting to say for the last few days started to rush through me—and spilled out of my mouth before I could stop it.

“I know you guys don’t care about finding Hallie,” I said. “I can tell you just want to play soccer and go to Cardinals games and eat frozen custard and have fun without me.”

Both looked startled. “That’s not true,” Abby said, but I cut her off.

“Yes, it is,” I said, feeling tears starting.

“No, it’s not,” insisted Camila, “but all *you* want to do is look for Hallie.”

“What?!” I asked, feeling defensive.

Camila twisted her hair. “You said we were going to explore St. Louis *together*—but I don’t think you really want to explore *with* me. You don’t want to go back to Coventry House, or visit the Arch or the Mississippi River…”

“I’ve been to those places!” I said.

“*I* haven’t,” Camila said, almost apologetically. “You say you want to be an explorer, Lea, but you only want to explore the things you want, not what anyone else wants.”

“That’s not true!” I shouted.

My face felt like it was burning up. Before anyone could say anything else, I turned my back on them and hurried toward COCA, breaking into a run so they wouldn’t see the hot tears spill down my cheeks.

The Mural in the Morning Room

Chapter 8

I locked myself in a stall in the lobby bathroom and cried. It didn't make me feel much better. Taking a deep breath, I thought about the last few days and how I'd acted with Camila. I remembered how she'd kept mentioning going to see the Arch, or Dodger—and how I'd brushed her off. I felt awful when I realized that I had been thinking so much about finding Hallie, I'd forgotten to be a good host to Camila. She was only here for a week, and I hadn't been listening to her at all! No wonder Camila was having more fun with Abby.

After a few minutes, Abby knocked softly on the bathroom door and told me my dad was there to pick us up. We walked to the station wagon in awkward silence. No one spoke once we got into the car, but if Dad noticed anything was wrong, he didn't mention it. Instead, as he pulled out of the parking lot, he said, "We need to swing by Coventry House, girls. I have to drop something off for Lea's mom."

Camila perked up. "We can see Dodger!" she said to Abby. Even though I didn't smile with them, the thought of maybe petting a kitten made me feel a little better, too.

"*This* is Coventry House?" exclaimed Abby when we pulled up outside the old mansion my mom was restoring. "It's like a castle," she whispered. By the time we passed through the main entrance into the front hall with its curving double staircase, Abby's eyes were wide with wonder.

"Dad," I asked, "can we show Abby around?"

“Sure,” he said, “but only if it’s a quick tour. I need you to be back here, ready to go in fifteen minutes.” We nodded, and he disappeared into the Great Room.

Camila walked around the main entry area, checking all the nooks. “I don’t see Dodger,” she said, letting go of a huge sigh.

“It’s a big building,” I replied. “And he’s a cat—he could be anywhere.”

Camila nodded and sat down next to Abby at the base of the double staircase. Abby looked sad. For a moment, I forgot that we were in a fight. I just wanted Abby to see some of what made Coventry House so unique.

“Hey,” I said to her, “do you want to see something?”

Abby’s face lit up when Camila and I showed her the hidden door by the foyer. “Whoa,” she said. “A secret room!”

“It’s a morning room,” I told her, “and it has a hidden mural they’re restoring. Want to see?”

Abby nodded eagerly.

The minute we walked in, it was obvious things had changed. A few days ago, the mural had been covered in cloudy plaster. Now, the wall it was on was exploding with color: swirling purples, golds, bronzes, and blues.

Sarah the art restorer was standing on a ladder nearby with a small tray of water, dabbing part of the wall with a wet cloth. Seeing us, she waved and took out her earbuds. “Hey there! What do you think?” she asked.

“It looks incredible!” I exclaimed. Sarah grinned.

As we got closer, she stepped off the ladder and pushed it back, exposing the full mural. Beneath the painting’s bright blue sky and whirling cloud were three girls in a field of flowers, wearing identical, old-fashioned dresses with wide square collars and knee-length skirts. One held an open book in her lap, another stood playing the violin, and a third danced. The wind blew back their dresses and hair in waves, and the field they stood in was full of ruddy, star-shaped flowers that I immediately recognized.

“*Copper irises!*” I whispered.

Sarah tilted her head at me. “How’d you know that?” she asked.

Abby and Camila’s eyes were round with recognition.

“Copper irises!” Abby stammered out. “Hallie’s corsage is a copper iris, in her photo!”

“Right, and Ama wrote in her diary that they were her favorite flowers,” I reminded them.

“It *cannot* be a coincidence,” Camila declared.

“I know,” I said. I turned to Sarah, who looked confused. “My mom said the mural was commissioned by Francis Coventry, right?”

“Well, yes and no,” Sarah said. “At first, we thought the mural was painted when the house was built in the late 1880s. But as we restored it, we noticed the style of dresses the girls are wearing isn’t from that period. So we did some digging. It turns out the mural was partially repainted in 1922, when the house became a school for girls.

“This room was a silent study room during that time,” Sarah continued. “We think the figures of the girls in the mural were altered so they would represent students. See?” She pointed to a tiny gold fleur-de-lis, barely visible on the violin player’s collar. “All the Coventry School girls wore these. The mural was plastered over when the school closed and the building was turned into a boardinghouse. This room became an office, and all the old stuff from the school and before was either sold or sent to the Missouri History Museum’s archives.”

I barely heard her. I was staring at the golden fleur-de-lis on the girl’s collar. I studied the other two girls in the mural—they were wearing identical fleur-de-lis pins. Something about the pins looked familiar.

“Hallie’s wearing a pin like this in her photo!” I told Camila and Abby. As soon as the words came out of my mouth, an idea hit me like a bolt of lightning. In a flash, I knew how everything—Hallie, Ama, the copper irises, the compass, and the fleur-de-lis pins—could be connected. “Maybe Ama and Hallie went to the Coventry School together?” I blurted out.

Abby’s eyes lit up. “Yes!” she said, practically shouting. “That has to be it!” She grinned at me. I smiled back, until I remembered I was still mad at her for saying I’d never find Hallie. I turned back and refocused on the mural. The girls in the painting smiled down at me looking calm, like they knew something I didn’t.

“Is it okay if I take some photos?” I asked Sarah.

“Of course,” she said, moving the ladder to a part of the wall that was still covered with plaster. I slipped my camera out of my backpack and switched it on. As Sarah picked up her plaster knife and brush, I started taking photos. Her hands moved quickly, chipping off the cracked top layer of plaster. Abby and Camila stood next to her, looking up at the girls in the mural. The flakes of plaster fell down, swirling through the air like snow. From where I stood, it seemed like the girls in the mural were smiling right at Abby and Camila, as if they were all connected. Looking at them, I knew it would make a great photograph.

I raised my camera. Abby looked confused. “Are you taking a picture of us or the mural?” she asked.

“Um, sort of both. Just pretend I’m not here, okay?” I said. Abby looked curious, but then she gave me a little nod and went back to watching Sarah

work.

Specks of plaster came loose as Sarah chipped at the wall, and the white dust floated toward Abby's and Camila's upturned faces. I set the camera on burst mode and started shooting as I moved around. Finally, I stopped and reviewed the shots. One of the shots was perfect—Abby and Camila smiled up at the mural, plaster snowflakes on their shoulders, as the girls in the painting smiled down on them. I couldn't help smiling. For the first time in a long time, I'd taken exactly the picture I'd wanted to take.

It was almost time to go meet Dad, but Abby had to use a restroom. Sarah directed her to one down the back hall, where we'd seen Dodger on our last visit. "I'll be right back," said Abby, slipping through the side door.

Sarah put her earbuds back in and got back to work. I gave Camila a half smile, hoping she would say something, but she turned back to the mural and avoided my eyes. She was obviously still upset with me. Suddenly it felt like I was standing at the edge of an icy pool. Finally, I got the courage to dive in and say something. "Camila? I'm really sorry," I said. "You were right to get mad at me. I haven't been the best host."

It took a long moment, but finally Camila's eyes warmed a little. "I am sorry, too," she said. "I know you miss your grandmother, and you want to solve the mystery so you can feel close to her."

I blinked, surprised. I hadn't realized that Ama was the reason I wanted to find Hallie, but once Camila said it, I knew she was right. "Yes," I admitted. "But I also want to be a good host. Tomorrow we should do what *you* want to do."

Camila let out a bright laugh. "Oh, Lea," she said, "I really *do* want to help find Hallie, you know."

"Really?" I said.

Camila nodded. "Of course I do, because you're my friend. *And* I want to try frozen custard," she replied. "And go see the Arch. And see Dodger. But we can do *all* of that, I think. Yes?"

"Yes," I said in a rush, and we hugged.

As we waited for Abby to come back, I thought about what I would say to her. I'd apologize for being too sensitive, I thought, but minutes passed, and there was no sign of Abby. It was weird.

"Perhaps she is still in the restroom," said Camila.

"Let's go check," I said. We went through the side door and made our way to the bathroom. When we opened the door, it was empty. Where had Abby gone? We were going to be late to meet Dad. "Maybe she got lost," I said. "We should look for her." Camila nodded.

We left the bathroom and moved quickly down the long hallway. I kept telling myself that Coventry House was big and it was easy to get lost, but I could feel worry tightening in my chest.

"Abby! *Abby!"* we called as we turned a corner. All I could hear was the creak of the floorboards as we moved. I was starting to get really worried. At the top of my lungs, I shouted—

"ABBY!" I held my breath, waiting for a response. Above us, I heard a faint noise.

"Abby?!" Camila called, looking up at the ceiling.

"*Here, Dodger! Kitty, kitty, kitty? Dodger!*" We could hear Abby's voice, one flight up.

Halfway back the way we'd come was a sagging set of side stairs. Camila and I raced to it and started up the steps, calling for Abby. We reached the second-floor landing. A pile of dusty old rope that looked like it was as old as the house was in the middle of the floor. We stepped over it as we moved ahead, still hearing Abby above us.

The stairs twisted up one more flight, but the steps were in bad shape. Some were splintered and cracked, and at the top, one was missing.

"Should we keep going?" Camila asked, frightened.

I knew Mom had told us that the upper levels of the house were still under major construction—but I also knew we needed to find Abby. If we could just get her to come downstairs, maybe none of us would get in trouble.

"Let's just go up one more floor slowly," I said. Camila gave a little worried nod. We edged up the stairs, gripping the side railing.

"Abby?" I called.

"Lea?! Is that you?" Abby sounded excited. "You guys have to come here!"

"Abby, we're not supposed to be up here! You need to be careful," I called, as I helped Camila up over the rotted step to the top of the third-floor landing.

My mom had said the upper floors of Coventry House were damaged, and when we stepped inside the first room off the landing, I gasped. In front of us there had once been a turret, but fire had burned away part of the circular room. On the far side, the thick brick wall had crumbled, revealing patches of sky. The floorboards were singed and uneven, and in a few places, the wood was rotted through. Abby stood by a skeletal window frame, and a few feet away crouched the Artful Dodger.

Abby lit up when she saw us. "Look!" She pointed to the cat. "I've got him!"

Dodger did not look like he'd been "gotten" by anyone. His tail and most of his fur were sticking straight up, and his eyes were wide. When Abby reached for him, he backed up with a hiss, as if he was frightened. "It's okay," Abby murmured as she crept toward him. "I'm the cat whisperer, Dodger."

As Abby approached, Dodger watched silently, his tail twitching. As she reached down to pick him up, he leapt away.

"Dodger, no!" Abby squealed, lunging for him.

"Be careful!" I shouted, but Abby was already running after the kitten. As she crossed the floorboards, the wood groaned in a sickening, splintering sound.

Camila and I screamed, and I shut my eyes, terrified that Abby had fallen through the floor.

"Lea!!" Abby shrieked. "Help!"

I looked, and my stomach dropped. Abby was clinging to the window frame and standing on a narrow patch of floorboard, with Dodger at her feet. A giant hole gaped in front of them. One wrong move and Abby and Dodger would both fall in.

Trapped
Chapter 9

Abby stared at the hole in front of her, then up at me. Her eyes flashed with fear. “I’m going to fall!” she cried. Her voice sounded high and thin, like an alarm going off.

“Don’t move!” I ordered, remembering when my dad was trapped on the cliff in Brazil. The rescuers had told him not to make any sudden movements, in case they triggered more rock or mud to collapse. “Hold on to the window frame. Stay still.”

I turned to Camila, who looked just as scared as Abby. “Go down to the main floor and get help,” I told her. Camila nodded and rushed back down the stairs.

“We’re getting help, Abby,” I called, trying to sound calm although my heart was racing. Even from across the room, I could see she was trembling.

She had wrapped her arms over the window ledge, gripping tightly.

“It’s going to be okay,” I reassured her, as Dodger cautiously approached and rubbed against her leg. “See? Dodger thinks so, too. He likes you. You *are* a cat whisperer.”

Abby tried to smile, but her lower lip wobbled as she stared into the pit in front of her. “How far down do you think it is?” she said in a small voice.

“It doesn’t matter, because you’re not going to fall,” I said, trying to sound confident.

Abby nodded as if she wanted to believe me. She shut her eyes. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

“So am I,” I told my best friend. “But you’re going to be okay.”

Abby shook her head. “You don’t know that,” she said, and her voice quavered. “What if the rest of this floor collapses, and I fall?”

She was right. The boards definitely looked as if they might not be able to support her weight for long. *There must be something I can do*, I thought. I

remembered the coiled rope I'd seen on the second-floor landing.

"Hold on," I said. I could hear Abby trying not to cry as I raced out of the room and down to the landing below. The rope was so old that thick dust flew into my face like a puff of smoke when I picked it up. I coughed but kept moving, running back upstairs with the rope in my arms.

"Abby, here!" I called, coming back into the room. I threw her one end of the rope. "Put this through the loops on your jeans and tie it."

Abby carefully released the window frame so she could thread the rope around her waist twice. She knotted the end to her belt and locked her hands over the knot.

"What now?" she asked.

I looked around the turret room. Above me, a burned-out hole in the ceiling exposed a beam that hadn't been touched by fire. Seeing it made me remember a trick Abby and I had seen once when some movers delivered a piano to a house down the block. It was too big to go through the front door, so they used a pulley to haul it up to some big windows on the second floor and inside. I tossed my end of the rope over the rafter and ran with it over to the thick wooden post at the top of the stairs.

"Just in case something breaks," I said to Abby, "this will help." She nodded, watching as I wrapped my end of the rope around the thick wooden post, double-knotted my end to one of the loops, and tucked it under. *This will have to do*, I thought.

Just then, Abby screamed! I looked over my shoulder. Abby was still at the window, but Dodger was now on the sill beside her. "Sorry, false alarm," Abby said, releasing a nervous laugh. "He scared me."

Dodger purred, rubbing his head against Abby's hand on the window. When his tail flicked her cheek, she made a face.

"So *now* you want to be friends?" she said, but I could tell she was calming down. Abby reached over to pet the cat. As she shifted her weight, the boards under her cracked with a sound like fireworks exploding.

Abby yelped and hugged the window frame.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't want to just stand here until the rest of the floor gives out!"

I crouched down, studying the hole in the floor. It wasn't as big as it had seemed at first, but the broken boards were blackened and weakened by the fire. It was hard to know where on the floor you could step safely.

I lay on the ground and craned my neck, trying to see beneath the floor at the edge of the hole.

“What are you doing?” Abby said.

“Hold on,” I replied. From this angle, I could see a support beam running under the floorboards where Abby stood. The beam was thick and sturdy-looking, and didn’t appear to be blackened by fire.

Abby shifted her weight, and the floorboards groaned again. She clutched the rope around her waist and looked at me in panic.

“Step to your right and put one foot in front of the other,” I told her.

She followed my instructions, putting her feet on top of where the beam was. “That feels more solid,” she said.

“It is. There’s a strong beam underneath. If you step straight ahead, you’ll be on it the whole time, and you can walk over here.”

Abby looked at me—then down at the jagged hole in the floor beside her, terrified. “I can’t,” she said. This wasn’t the fearless Abby I knew. A tear ran down her face.

“Yes, you can,” I told her. “I’ll help you.” I grabbed the rope, leaving only enough slack for Abby to walk the few feet across to me. “The rope and the rafter will hold you up if you fall,” I assured her.

Abby looked down at the hole again. In that moment, I tried to send her all the courage I had ever had.

Abby took a deep breath, then turned and grabbed Dodger, holding him under her arm. To my surprise, he didn’t fight at all as she let go of the window frame and started across the room.

“Good,” I said, sounding confident. I couldn’t let her know I was scared. “Now walk straight.”

Abby did as she was told, putting one foot in front of the other like a gymnast on a balance beam. Dodger mewed as they passed the edge of the pit, but Abby kept going across the rickety floor until she was nearly beside me. Then, with a deep sigh, Abby took a giant step through the doorway onto the safety of the landing, and hugged me harder than she ever had before.

We were halfway down the stairs when we heard Camila and my parents calling our names from below. We met them on the second-floor landing. My mom looked surprised when she saw Abby holding Dodger, but she didn’t say anything. She and Dad hugged us both, but I could tell they were really upset. I could see my father looking at the rope around Abby’s waist, and I knew I’d have some explaining to do later.

As we tramped back downstairs, I started to confess what had happened,

but Abby interrupted me.

“Mr. and Mrs. Clark, it was all my fault. I saw Dodger and I forgot about everything else,” she said as we reached the front entry hall. “Camila and Lea were just trying to help, and Lea saved me!”

I felt a surge of pride.

“That’s sweet of you to say, Abby,” Mom replied sternly, “but none of you should have gone upstairs. You could have been seriously hurt!”

I felt my pride crumble, replaced by shame. I studied my feet, not wanting to see the disappointment in my mother’s eyes.

“Not to mention,” she continued, “that if anyone had been injured, the city could have shut down the entire restoration of Coventry House.”

“Well, now, that didn’t happen,” Dad said soothingly. “The girls are safe, and as an added bonus, they have a cat!”

“Thank goodness no one was hurt,” Mom said. I could hear the anxiety in her voice. She rubbed her forehead.

Camila, Abby, and I shared a guilty look. I was glad we’d saved Dodger, but I hated letting my mother down. “I’m really sorry,” I said.

Mom softened a bit. “I know you are. I hope I can trust that you will never do it again.”

We all nodded. Dodger squirmed in Abby’s arms. I scratched him under his chin and he started purring, rubbing his head over my hand. “We still need to help Dodger,” I said in a small voice.

“Yes,” Camila chimed in. “What will happen to him?”

“My mom should take a look at him,” said Abby. She turned to me. “He can stay at our house, since I know your dad is allergic.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Dad said. “Let’s get going before Dodger changes his mind.”

On the way home, I asked Dad if we could stop for frozen custard. “Camila wants to try it before she goes back,” I said. Camila beamed at me.

At Ted Drewes, we got concretes—custard with the toppings mixed in. Camila and I got our custard with pralines and caramel sauce, while Abby got hers with fresh cherries and hot fudge. Camila ate hers so fast she got a melted custard mustache—and a brain freeze! “Mmmmmm,” she kept saying between bites, as Dad drove us home.

Dodger was curled on the backseat between me and Abby, napping

comfortably. He didn't seem to miss Coventry House too much.

Dad drove to Abby's house, a few blocks from ours. Abby's mom examined Dodger, checking his eyes, ears, teeth, and fur.

"He's thin," she noted, "but he looks generally healthy. Abby and I will clean and de-flea him. And Lea, if you take a nice picture of him, we can make a flyer."

"Yes!" enthused Abby. "We'll hang it in the veterinary office. Customers are sometimes looking for cats or dogs to adopt." She gave me a shy smile, and I smiled back.

When it was time for us to head home, Abby walked us out. As Dad and Camila continued down the front steps, Abby took my arm.

"Hey," she said, stopping. She seemed nervous, very un-Abby-like. "Thanks again for saving me."

"I didn't really save you, Abby," I pointed out. After all, it's not like I had airlifted her out of there, the way Dad was rescued by the helicopter in Brazil. "You saved yourself," I added.

"Well, I couldn't have saved *myself* without you," Abby argued, sounding more like herself. Still, her chin wobbled a little, and her eyes looked wet. "I'm *really* sorry for saying you might not find Hallie," she said. "And I'm even sorrier for making you cry."

"I know," I said, trying not to cry again. Only this time it wasn't from anger. "I'm sorry too. I overreacted."

"I don't want you to be mad at me." Abby wiped her eyes. "Lea, you're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too," I said in a rush, relieved. "I'm sorry about getting so upset before. At first I really liked that you and Camila got along so well. But after a while, I started to feel bad about it. I felt like maybe you guys preferred hanging out without me."

Abby looked stunned. "Are you *kidding?*" she said. "This whole time I was trying to be extra-nice and friendly to Camila, because she was your special friend and I wanted to make you happy." She looked down and added, "Also, I was worried that you liked her more than me."

"Really?" I said in disbelief.

Abby gave a hard little nod. "Ever since you got back from Brazil, all you've talked about is how great Camila is, and then how she was coming to visit. I thought maybe when she got here that you would forget all about me and just want to hang out with her," she confessed. "Then of course I met her, and she was really fun, but I was still sort of worried."

"Oh, Abby, you're crazy," I said through a smile. "You'll always be my

best friend."

"I know that *now*!" Abby snorted, and then giggled. She slung an arm around my shoulders. "Lea, you'll always be my best friend, too."

After dinner, I pulled out the photograph of Hallie again, and Camila and I stared at it.

"I don't see anything new," I said with a sigh.

Camila looked thoughtful. "Perhaps we should do as Ms. Garcia says and look at things in a new way."

"Okay, but how?" I threw myself onto my bed, frustrated. My eyes came to rest on the photo on my bedside table—the one of Ama with the Masai warrior in Africa. Ama was sunburned under her bush hat and she looked tired, but her compass still hung around her neck, and she wore a triumphant smile. I remembered her telling me once that on the way to Mount Kilimanjaro, she and her guide had come to a river where the bridge had been washed away by rain. "I was worried we wouldn't make it," she had said, "but the guide led us downstream to another place where we could cross. There's always more than one way to get where you want to go."

Suddenly, I felt a burst of inspiration. "Hold on!" I said, sitting up. "We've just been searching for information about *Hallie*. But maybe instead we should look for more information about *Ama*. That would be easier to find, and it could lead us to Hallie if she and Ama are connected."

"That's true," Camila agreed enthusiastically. "But where?"

Yes, *where?* I'd already reread Ama's journals, and I hadn't found anything about Hallie there. Where else could I look? Then I remembered.

The attic. After Ama had passed away, Mom had given away many of her clothes and books, but she'd kept a box or two of Ama's mementos and stored them in our attic. Maybe if Camila and I looked through them, we'd find something that could help us solve the mystery and uncover the connection between Ama, Hallie, and the compass necklace.

A Bridge to the Past

Chapter 10

Dad was surprised when I asked him if Camila and I could search the attic, but he didn't say no. He came upstairs to the hall outside my room and pulled the attic ladder down from the ceiling.

Camila looked up nervously at the narrow wooden stepladder to the attic. I could tell she was thinking about Abby getting stranded upstairs at Coventry House.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "It's totally safe."

Camila gave a sharp nod. She gritted her teeth and followed me up as Dad watched us.

In a corner of the attic we found the boxes marked "Ama" and began digging through them. They were packed with loose photos and souvenirs from all over the world: masks from Mexico, a kimono from Japan, a wooden flute from Peru. I sifted through photos of Ama on the Great Wall of China and swimming in New Zealand.

We kept searching. Camila pulled out an old, dusty photo sleeve from inside an overstuffed book. When she opened it, her eyes widened. "*Look*," she said, handing it to me.

Inside was a black-and-white photo of a young Ama in a pleated skirt and a dark jacket. Pinned to the lapel was a metal pin—a fleur-de-lis.

"Look, look! She went to the Coventry School, like Hallie!" I blurted.

"You were right!" Camila said, wide-eyed.

An electric thrill zipped through me. I turned to Camila. "You wanted to help me find Hallie, and you did! This photo could help lead us to her!" Camila and I beamed at each other. I looked at Ama's picture again and knew

there was someone else who'd want to see this.

When Camila and I came down from the attic, I told her I'd be right back. Clutching Ama's photo, I raced downstairs, heading for Mom's office off the dining room. But as soon as I turned into the front hall, I heard her voice coming from the kitchen.

"This is a disaster," she said, sounding upset.

"Maybe you can talk to them," I heard Dad say.

"I *did*," Mom said. "They said they've made their decision."

I stayed in the hallway shadows, unsure what to do. When I looked out, I could see my parents standing in the kitchen.

Dad put a comforting hand on Mom's arm. "Hey," he said. "Don't give up. Maybe the Preservation Society can find another sponsor."

"It's almost *all* our funding," Mom said quietly. "If we don't get another sponsor for the restoration soon, it'll be too late. The bank will foreclose on it and sell it off to developers. Coventry House will be torn down."

The next day was chilly enough to make me shiver as I looked out the van window while we headed downtown. The gray sky threatened to darken into storm clouds any minute. It looked the way I felt right now—sad and hazy. I couldn't stop thinking about Coventry House being torn down.

Soon our destination came into view—the silver loop of the Gateway Arch. Next to me, Camila stretched her neck for a better look. As we got closer, the Arch loomed over us, huge. You can take a tram to the top, and the city views are unforgettable. Although Camila had wanted to visit the Arch, with her fear of heights I didn't know if she would want to go all the way up.

The van dropped us off near the Arch. As we walked toward it, Ms. Garcia told us, "It's called the Gateway Arch because St. Louis was regarded as America's Gateway to the West. In the 19th century, pioneers had to cross the Mississippi River and pass through St. Louis before they went west. So in a way, the Arch celebrates how the city was like a bridge from America's past to its future."

By now, we were much closer. The Arch stretched over us like a steel rainbow. "This is the most photographed place in St. Louis," Ms. Garcia said as we all looked up. "Your challenge is going to be to find fresh ways to shoot it. I know you can do it! Is everyone ready to go up and start taking photos?"

I glanced at Camila. She was staring up at the Arch, looking anxious. "Don't worry," I said, squeezing her arm. "We'll be with you the whole time."

We crowded inside the sleek silver tram. After a long moment, it started moving, lifting straight up from underneath. It felt like we were inside a spaceship taking off.

“Whoa,” said Abby.

Camila sucked in her breath. I knew she was afraid. It didn’t help that Kevin kept repeating, “We’re going so high! We’re going so high!”

Camila put her hand on the wall, flat, like she was trying to stay standing. “Just breathe. You’re doing a great job!” I whispered. She gasped as the tram turned, curving up the spine of the Arch, and then slowed to a stop as we reached the top.

“We’re now at the highest point in the city,” said Ms. Garcia, as we exited onto the observation deck. “Six hundred and thirty feet above the ground.”

The buildings, parks, and streets lay below in a complicated puzzle. From here, City Hall looked like a matchbox with a dome. I wanted to show Camila, but her eyes were closed again.

“Camila, you have to see this—it’s incredible!” I said. “You know, sometimes the best experiences are also the hardest. Remember in Brazil, how afraid I was to snorkel? But I’m so glad I did it.”

Slowly, Camila opened her eyes. As she did, the sun started to come out, making the city below glitter. “Wow,” Camila said softly, her eyes full of wonder.

“Look—City Museum!” I said, pointing out the jumble of colored pipes with the yellow bus on its roof in the distance. Camila took it in, fascinated. I could tell she was forgetting her fear, because she lifted up her camera and looked through it. I took out my camera too and circled the observation deck, looking out the windows at the city. I noticed how the sunlight reflected off the shimmering Mississippi, and how Eads Bridge looked like an iron spiderweb, and the intricate patchwork of parks, buildings, and streets that stretched to the horizon. It was like I was seeing St. Louis for the first time.

Soon, we stepped back on the tram. As it accelerated down, Camila yelped, but she looked excited, not scared. By the time we reached the ground and the tram’s doors opened, she was giggling. Camila turned to me. “It is as you said, Lea. You cannot let your fear stop you.”

After the trip up inside the Arch, I felt inspired. Ms. Garcia gave us twenty minutes to take photos, and everywhere I turned, I had a new idea. I took pictures from the base of the Arch looking straight up, and a bunch more

running toward it. The time flew by, and suddenly it was time to leave. I had been too busy trying to capture what I was seeing and how I was feeling to notice.

"How did it go?" Ms. Garcia asked us as the class walked back to the van.

"Good," said Camila. "I took one I like—look!" She held out her camera for us to see. It was a photograph of me, running in front of the Arch. My hair was blowing around, and I was jumping, caught in midair, trying to get my shot with my camera. I looked really happy.

"Wow," said Ms. Garcia. "*That* is a great action shot, Camila!"

Camila looked pleased. "Thank you," she replied. "I think Lea looks very like her grandmother Ama in this."

"Lea, you do!" Abby echoed. Camila showed me the photo again. They were right. My head was tilted back, and my hair caught the light as it bounced behind me. I looked bold and free, just like Ama did in the photo of her jumping over that rock on Bondi Beach.

"What about you, Lea?" asked Ms. Garcia as we reached the van. "May I see some of the pictures you took?" I nodded, handing her my camera. "Very nice," she said, scrolling through the shots I'd taken while I was running. She scrolled back even further. When she came to the shot of Abby and Camila in front of the girls in the Coventry House mural, she paused. For a moment I thought something was wrong, but when Ms. Garcia looked at me she seemed really impressed.

"Lea," she said, "this photo is truly striking. The composition makes it seem as if the girls in the painting are looking at Abby and Camila."

I nodded. "That was the idea," I said, pleased she'd noticed.

"You've really found your eye," she said. "This is exceptional."

I was so happy, I felt like doing cartwheels. Ms. Garcia liked my photo!

"The mural in the picture is striking, too," she continued. "Where is it?"

"In Coventry House, in Old North St. Louis," I replied. *But it might not be there for long*, I thought sadly, as she handed me back my camera.

At lunch, I told Camila and Abby about Coventry House possibly being torn down. "*What?*" said Abby, taking a bite of her peanut butter and banana sandwich. "After all the work they're doing on it? Why?"

"My mom said it would happen if they don't get the funding they need," I replied. I scrunched up my sandwich wrapper and threw it in the trash.

“When I think about that, finding Hallie doesn’t seem so important anymore.”

Abby frowned. “Lea, what are you talking about? I know how much you want to find Hallie. If you don’t find out the whole story, you’ll always have questions.”

I nodded, but I still felt worried. “I guess I’m just afraid,” I admitted. “What if, even after I search, I never discover anything more about Hallie?”

“You must not let your fears stop you,” Camila said. “It is as you said in the Arch: When something is difficult, that is when you must continue.”

Camila was right, and I knew Ama wouldn’t want me to quit, either. She’d want me to keep moving forward to find Hallie. And I thought I knew where we needed to go.

The Coventry School for Girls

Chapter 11

When Dad picked us up, I asked if he could take us to the Missouri History Museum's Library and Research Center. Sarah the art restorer had said that when the Coventry School closed, all its papers had been taken there, so that seemed like the best place to look next.

My dad was pleased at my sudden interest in the History Museum's library. "It's a pretty fantastic place," he said as we drove toward Forest Park.

My father was right. The research center was across from Forest Park, in a domed yellow brick building that Dad said had once been a Jewish temple. He dropped us off and promised to meet us in an hour.

"Do you know where we're going?" Camila asked as we headed inside.

"I think so," I said, even though I wasn't totally sure. In the lobby, Abby and Camila followed me across the polished stone floor to a wall map, which said that the Archives and Photographs Department was ahead on the left.

We moved through a double-doored entrance into a gigantic reading room. Above us soared the huge, stained-glass dome. It was so quiet I could hear Abby suck in her breath as we walked down the aisle, past people reading.

"I sure hope you know what you're doing," she whispered to me.

A few adults looked up as I led Abby and Camila up to the main information desk. A tall librarian sat there, looking at his computer screen.

I cleared my throat. "Hello," I said.

Seeing me, the librarian blinked hard and turned up the corners of his mouth in the tiniest smile I'd ever seen. "May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, trying to sound confident. "I need to look at the enrollment

records for the Coventry School for Girls between 1952 and 1956, please."

The librarian managed to raise his eyebrows and narrow his eyes at the same time. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Um, ten?" I told him, feeling self-conscious.

"Do you have a parent with you?"

I shook my head.

"Well then, my apologies, but our policy is that children under sixteen need an adult to do research. I think it best that you come back with a responsible grown-up." Before any of us could reply, he walked off, leaving us standing there.

Camila looked confused. "What is going on?" she asked.

"He won't help us because we're kids," said Abby, upset. "What are we supposed to do? We can't just leave—"

"We're not leaving," I told her. I was angry at myself. I should have asked Dad to stay, or called ahead about the archive's policies. My father had given me his cell phone in case of an emergency, but I was guessing my parents wouldn't think this qualified as one. Still, it felt like one to me. By the time Dad returned to pick us up, the archive would be closed, and who knew when I'd be able to come back. Time was running out. I needed to fix this problem myself.

"Wait here," I said, and marched after the librarian. He was about to go through a door marked "Restricted" when I stepped in front of him.

"Excuse me," he said. "This is a restricted area!"

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, my voice firm. A few of the adults working at tables looked over. "May I please speak with you?" I asked.

The librarian gave the adults a weak little smile. It evaporated as soon as he looked at me. He folded his arms. "I'm busy. What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

I launched in, explaining as fast as I could about finding Hallie's photo, and Ama and Coventry House. As I talked, Abby and Camila joined us. I told the librarian how the hunt had led us to the Jewel Box, the main library, and now here. "I may not be an adult, but that doesn't mean I'm not doing real research. I *am*," I finished passionately.

"Interesting," said the librarian. After a long moment, he spoke again. "So you're looking for records from the Coventry School for Girls?"

Abby, Camila, and I nodded eagerly.

The librarian let go of a sigh so big he seemed to deflate. "We house the school's complete academic and registration records here," he told us. "*You* can't look at them, of course…but I suppose there's no harm if you watch *me*

look at them.” Then, out of nowhere, he winked at us.

We sat at a long table and waited until the librarian returned with the Coventry School registry from 1952. “What name am I looking for?” he asked, opening the wide leather book.

“Amanda Silva,” I said, remembering Ama’s last name before she married Grandpa Bill.

The librarian flipped through the pale green pages. After a minute or two, he stopped. “There!” he said, looking pleased with himself. At the top of the page was a small black-and-white school photo of Ama as a girl, smiling brightly.

“Amanda Silva, eighth grade,” read Abby over the librarian’s shoulder. “It has her address here and everything!”

Pride soared through me. I’d been right! Ama *had* been a student at Coventry!

The librarian scanned the page and said, “It says here she withdrew at the end of the school year.”

“What does it mean, ‘withdrew’?” Camila asked.

“It means she left,” replied the librarian.

“Because they moved to West County!” I chimed in, recalling what Mom had told me. Thinking about Ama having to leave her school and friends made me sad for her. I couldn’t imagine having to move away from Lafayette Square and Abby. The more I thought about it, the more certain I felt that Hallie and Ama had been friends at the Coventry School. But I didn’t yet have any proof.

“There should be a girl named Hallie in the same grade,” I said to the librarian.

He read off names as he turned the pages. “Mary, Shirley, Deborah, Lynn…” Finally he reached the last page. “There’s no Hallie, I’m sorry.”

No Hallie? That couldn’t be right! Disappointment flooded through me. *They had to have gone to school together*, I thought, feeling a sharp pang squeeze my heart. I was so close to figuring it out. What was I missing?

“Maybe Hallie is a nickname?” Abby piped up.

“You’re right!” I said, excitement lifting me up. “Her real name could be something else. Maybe we can recognize her photograph!”

As the librarian turned back to the start of the eighth-grade section, I pulled out my photo of Hallie at the Jewel Box. She would have been a little

older in this picture than in her school photo, but I still hoped it would help us recognize Hallie if we saw her.

Carefully, the librarian flipped through the pages of eighth-grade girls. We studied each little black-and-white picture. Some girls had horn-rimmed glasses, others wore bows in their hair, but none of them looked like Hallie.

The librarian turned a page, and suddenly I squinted at one of the photos. The girl's hair was longer, and her face rounder, but her eyes met the camera in the bold gaze I had come to know so well.

"Hallie!" I said, too loud.

The librarian shushed me, but his eyes had sparks in them. "That's her?" he asked, showing Abby and Camila, too. We compared the two photos and agreed it was definitely Hallie.

"Harriet Emmeline Leland," I read. "There's even an address."

"It may well be out of date," the librarian said. "However, we have access here to the public city records. If you like, I can do a search under her name."

I nodded, still in disbelief. A few days ago when I'd found Hallie's photo, she'd seemed so far away. It was thrilling to think there was a chance that she could still be right here in St. Louis.

Twenty minutes later, we met my dad outside. We all started telling him what had happened—at the same time. "Hold on!" he laughed. "Pick a spokesperson, please."

"We found Hallie!" I said. "Her name's Harriet Leland—and that's not all. We have an address for her! Well, we have an address for a Harriet Leland Dumond," I said, handing him the slip of paper where I'd written it down.

Dad looked at it, impressed. "It's in the Central West End," he said. "That's close to here."

"Can we go see if it's her?" I begged. "Please?!"

Dad grinned. "Why not? Maybe Hallie will be at home."

I'd been to the Central West End before, but as we drove through the neighborhood, the homes looked bigger than I remembered. Mansions with marble columns sat on wide rolling lawns. Some had wrought-iron gates that looked as if only a giant could move them, while other houses hid behind

enormous pine trees. Our old Victorian on Hickory Street seemed like a playhouse by comparison.

"Here it is, 453 Lenox Street," Dad said, as we pulled up to a gray stone mansion with long windows.

A cobblestone path wound past a pair of granite lion statues up to a dark blue door. *Is this really Hallie's house?* I wondered. I might be about to meet a long-lost friend of my grandmother's! Nervous butterflies started fluttering in my stomach.

Before I could say anything, Abby threw open the car door. "Come on!" she said. "We have to see if she's home!"

I held my breath as we raced up to the front door.

"Lea, you knock," said Camila.

I took a breath, trying to calm the butterflies. I was a little scared, but more than that, I felt excited. I knocked on the door. After a long moment, the old-fashioned brass peephole opened. A blue eye squinted out at us.

"Yes?" said a man's voice.

"Hello," I said. "We're looking for Hallie? I mean, Harriet Leland Dumond?"

The door opened abruptly. A middle-aged man in an expensive-looking suit stood before us. "May I help you?" he asked, frowning.

"I hope so," Dad said. "I'm Mike Clark," he said, offering his hand. The man didn't shake it.

"Justus Dumond," he said instead, as if we should know that already.

"Right!" said my dad. "Good! Yes! Now, let's see, Mr. Dumont—"

"Du*mond*," the man corrected him.

"Dumond, yes," Dad stammered. "My daughter Lea has a theory—mind you, a theory based on actual research—that my late mother-in-law *knew* Mrs. Dumond—"

"Hallie," I interrupted. "They were classmates at the Coventry School."

While we talked, Justus Dumond crossed his arms, taking in Dad's baggy shorts, worn loafers, and the black socks he wore pulled halfway up his shins. Finally he broke in.

"Harriet is my mother, and she's quite frail. It wouldn't be suitable to bother her with this right now."

"But we wouldn't really be *bothering* her—" Abby started to say.

"Yes, you would," Justus replied sharply. And before anyone could say anything else, he stepped back—and shut the door in our faces!

We stood there, shocked. My dad let out a little surprised laugh, but

stopped when he saw my face.

I felt like a balloon that had suddenly popped. All the hope and excitement flooded out of me. Abby put a hand on my shoulder as I took a ragged breath, feeling tears rise. I knew Ama wouldn’t want me to cry. But I didn’t know what else to do.

Hallie

Chapter 12

I couldn't quite believe it. It didn't seem possible that even though I'd tracked Hallie down, I wasn't going to get a chance to talk to her. Abby and Camila each put a comforting arm around me.

"Well," said Dad sadly, "I guess that's that."

No, it's not, I thought to myself, feeling my temper rise. Impulsively, I reached up and knocked on the door, hard. Dad, Camila, and Abby looked worried, but I kept my eyes glued to the brass peephole. After a moment, it clicked open and Justus Dumond's eye appeared. Summoning my best manners, I plunged ahead.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Dumond," I said to the peephole. "We didn't mean to disturb you and your mother. Can you please let her know that Amanda Silva's granddaughter is here?"

Behind the door, Justus coughed, annoyed.

"Please?" I said, pleading. "If she doesn't want to see me, we'll go away and never bother you again."

"Fine," Justus muttered through the door after a moment. The peephole clicked shut.

"Great save, Lea!" Dad said.

I allowed myself to resume breathing. We stood there for what felt like an hour. Right as I was beginning to think that maybe Justus wasn't coming back, the door opened abruptly to reveal him in the doorway, red-faced and awkward.

"Right this way," he said, and just like that, he let us in.

We followed Justus down a hallway lined with oil paintings. He pushed open a dark wooden door and we entered a large room with a Persian rug. Antique maps of different sizes and colors crowded the walls from floor to ceiling. There was a map of Africa as tall as a grandfather clock, and framed

photos of strange, beautiful buildings and landscapes I didn't recognize. Even though the room was unfamiliar, oddly enough I felt right at home.

"Wow," Dad said, glancing around.

A rustling noise made me turn. Across the room, a pair of glass doors opened onto a sunny garden. Sitting just outside at a tiny wicker patio table was a white-haired woman. I knew it was Hallie because when she looked at me, her eyes and mouth curved in the same warm, secret way as they had in her photo. She was wearing a silky navy dress and cardigan. As she rose to greet us, I saw the compass necklace hanging around her neck.

My heart began to pound. I felt Camila's hand slip into mine, and I gave it a grateful squeeze.

"Hello," said Hallie, her gaze drifting from Dad to Abby to Camila to me. "Which one of you is Amanda Silva's granddaughter?" Her eyes caught mine, and she smiled. "I'm guessing it's you," she said. "You look very like Amanda."

I nodded, suddenly feeling tongue-tied. I'd been so focused on *finding* Hallie, I hadn't really ever thought about what I would say if we finally met.

Luckily, Abby didn't have that problem. "I can't believe we found you!" she said in a rush.

"Yes," said Hallie gently, as Justus helped her over to a leather chair. "How *did* you find me?" I pulled out the photograph of her as a girl from my backpack and showed her.

"I found this at Coventry House," I said, and launched into the whole story of how we'd managed to figure out who she was. By the time I was done, even Justus seemed impressed.

"Were you and my grandmother friends at the Coventry School?" I asked Hallie.

"Not just friends," Hallie replied. "We were *kindred spirits*. I was so lucky to find her. She was the only person I liked at that horrid school."

"Horrid?" I said, surprised.

Hallie laughed. "Well, that's how I thought of it at the time. I hated that they made us wear uniforms and expected us to act like ladies all the time. We had to learn how to pour tea, fold napkins, waltz, and cross our legs in the proper way," she said, shaking her head. "I found it all intensely boring. But once I met Amanda, things got better. Your grandmother was never boring!"

Hallie described how she had met Ama in eighth-grade geography class. "She knew the names of every capital city in Africa, and she was *interested* in them. She kept a list of all the places she wanted to visit. I started doing that, too. Amanda was more talkative and daring than I was, but we both shared a

desire for travel and adventure."

"Where did you want to go?" asked Camila.

"Everywhere!" Hallie's face lit up. "I wanted to leave and never come home, to live abroad forever. Amanda's goal was to travel to every country in the world. Naturally, neither of our families approved."

"Why not?" asked Abby.

"Oh, many reasons," said Hallie. "My family had been part of St. Louis society for a hundred years. They thought I should become a debutante, then get married and have children. They had my life all planned out for me, before it had even begun!" She laughed, but I could see sadness in her eyes. "Amanda's father just didn't understand her. His family had worked hard to come from Brazil to America when he was a youngster, so he couldn't see why she would ever want to leave, even just to travel."

"But *you* understood," I said.

Hallie smiled her small, secret smile again, and nodded. "The year we were in school together, we talked about where we would go, and the adventures we would have." She touched the compass around her neck, as if she was remembering.

"Where did you get that compass necklace?" I asked.

"One day, at a shop downtown, we found a pair of matching compasses," she said. "We decided we would make them into necklaces and wear them forever. That way we would never forget our friendship and dreams. And when we first put them on, we promised to each other that no matter what happened, someday we would travel and explore." Hallie gazed into the distance for a moment, the corners of her eyes crinkling at the memory.

"After Amanda moved away and the school closed, we lost touch. Still, I always remembered the promise we made—and I always wore this compass. It reminded me of what I really wanted—and gave me the strength to fulfill my dreams." She looked up at me. "I hope your grandmother was able to do the same," she said wistfully.

"She was," I replied. I told Hallie a little about Ama's adventures—and that no matter where she went, Ama always wore her compass necklace. Hallie smiled.

"Do you still have it?" she asked.

"No," I said. When I told Hallie about how I gave the necklace away in Brazil to Yemanjá, the Goddess of the Sea, her eyes glistened.

"That sounds exactly like something Amanda would do," she said, and put her hand lightly on mine.

"What about *you*?" Camila asked Hallie. "Did you have adventures?"

“Oh, *yes*,” Hallie said, and her face warmed with the memory. “After high school, I took the federal civil service exam and went to work for the U. S. State Department. I lived all over the world: Paris, Indonesia, Australia, Madagascar, and a few more places,” she said proudly. “Every time I moved to a new country I used to think to myself, maybe I’ll run into Amanda somewhere—in a cafe in Montmartre or perhaps on a beach in Sydney.”

“I had no idea your friendship was so special,” said Justus to Hallie. It sounded almost as if he was apologizing.

“It was,” said Hallie. “She inspired me—and I bet I’m not the only one she inspired. After all, Lea, you wanted to find me just because I was wearing Amanda’s compass necklace!” She squeezed my hand and I squeezed hers back, feeling a flood of affection.

Hallie’s eyes drifted to the old photo of herself. “Goodness, I was so young,” she said, sounding almost surprised.

“How old were you?” I asked.

“Sixteen,” Hallie replied. “It was my coming-out party as a debutante. My parents threw a big party at the Jewel Box to celebrate. I didn’t want one, of course. It seemed so old-fashioned and against everything that I believed in, but my mother insisted. Amanda wasn’t going to come, but I told her I could only stand it if she was there. So she borrowed one of my fancy dresses and she came.”

Hallie’s face clouded.

“That was the last time I saw her,” she said. “The Coventry School closed a few months later, and my parents sent me off to boarding school in Chicago.” She gazed at a vase of flowers on the mantel. Looking at the vase, I recognized the flowers.

“Copper irises!” I exclaimed. I pointed at the photo in Hallie’s hands. “You’re wearing a copper iris corsage here, and Ama mentioned them in her diary. She said they reminded her of your promise.”

Hallie’s face bloomed into a smile. “Yes. Amanda and I loved copper irises.”

“They’re on the mural at Coventry House, too!” said Camila.

“That’s right, I had forgotten that mural,” Hallie exclaimed. “I think that’s why we liked them so much. Also, the fleur-de-lis is patterned after the iris, so it reminded us of our friendship. In the language of flowers, you know, the iris symbolizes friendship.”

“Plus, you use the iris in your eye to *see*,” Abby chimed in, “and both of you wanted to *see* the world.”

“True,” Hallie said, chuckling, “although I don’t think we quite made

that connection.” She smiled, and as she looked from Abby to Camila to me, she looked so happy, she almost seemed to glow. “Thank you girls for finding me,” Hallie said. “I’m so glad to know that Amanda fulfilled her dreams, just as I did.” Hallie sat back in her chair and sighed. She seemed tired all of a sudden.

I realized it had grown late. The sunset’s light was filling the room. Dad cleared his throat and said we should get going, but as I picked up my backpack, an idea struck me. “May I take your picture?” I asked.

Hallie nodded, pleased. I pulled out my camera from my backpack and showed Hallie where to stand, in front of the glass door so that she was backlit by the golden light of the setting sun. She didn’t even seem to mind when I adjusted her position a little.

“Lea,” said Dad, “we don’t want to take up all of Hallie’s time.”

“It’s fine,” Hallie said gently as I turned her another smidge. “I can tell that Lea is an artist.”

I switched on my flash, then stepped back and found Hallie in the viewfinder. The angle, the light, the compass necklace, and her expression…it was all exactly right.

I held my breath and took the picture.

Picture Perfect

Chapter 13

On the last day of camp, I got up early to check my e-mail. The night before, I'd written to Zac and told him all about finding Hallie. I'd even e-mailed him the photo I'd taken of her, along with a scan of the original photo. I was betting he would think the whole story was pretty incredible, but when I checked my inbox, I had no new messages.

I tried not to let it get me down. Zac was really busy working at the animal sanctuary in Brazil. I knew he felt personally responsible for protecting the animals in the area, so I figured he was spending most of his time in the rainforest and probably just wasn't going online much.

I was worried about Zac, but I tried to put it out of my mind as we drove to camp. The class was spending all day in the photo studio at COCA, printing and framing our two favorite photos to show at the end-of-camp exhibit that night. First, Ms. Garcia helped us all crop and adjust the color and saturation of our photos so they looked exactly the way we wanted. Then she printed the shots we'd chosen on the giant photo printer in the corner. The images were different sizes, but each one was printed on satin-smooth photography paper and laid out on a long table to dry.

"Wow. This looks amazing!" said Abby, staring at her photograph of the Clydesdale horses at Soulard Market. She was right: The horses looked as if they were going to jump off the paper at any moment, snorting and tossing their manes.

"Abby, we'll start with your photo," said Ms. Garcia. She selected a cream-colored mat board. As everyone gathered around, Ms. Garcia put the board facedown on a mat cutter. She set the razor-sharp cutting tool to the right width and length and sliced out an exact square from the middle in a few quick strokes. She handed the finished mat frame to Abby, who fit the opening over her photo of the horses. It looked perfect.

One by one, Ms. Garcia cut different-colored mats for everyone's

pictures. My photo of Camila and Abby looking at the Coventry House mural got a pale lavender mat frame. Camila's picture of me in front of the Arch got one in dove gray.

While Ms. Garcia supervised, we centered the photos in their mat frames and then secured them with tiny pieces of double-sided mounting tape. As I worked, Abby peeked over my shoulder. Now that the photo was blown up, you could see every detail. Camila and Abby tilted their faces up to the girls in the mural, as flakes of plaster swirled around them.

"Wow," said Abby, in wonder. "I can't believe I'm a part of such a beautiful picture." My cheeks turned pink with pride.

The second photo I had selected to display was my portrait of Hallie wearing her compass necklace. When I'd shown it to Ms. Garcia, she'd suggested that we put the original photograph of Hallie from 1956 beside it. She even cut me a double mat for both pictures! When I lined up the mat frame over the portraits of Hallie, you could really see the similarities. Hallie at seventy-six stood the same way she did at sixteen, with her hands clasped at the waist. In both pictures her lips curved in the same warm, secret smile. She was beautiful at any age.

As my eyes moved from the older portrait to the one I'd taken, I felt a surge of pride that I'd been able to capture Hallie's expression exactly the way I'd hoped.

"How's it going?" Ms. Garcia asked, coming up to me.

I shrugged. "Okay, I think."

Ms. Garcia looked over my prints with a sharp eye, and then gave an approving smile. "You've really grown this week, Lea—both your skills and your eye. Your work is beautiful. I'd like to submit both of your photos to be published in the COCA magazine, if that's all right with you."

I felt dazed. Behind her, Camila and Abby were nodding and giving me two silent thumbs-up.

"And Lea," Ms. Garcia said, her eyes meeting mine, "you should consider photography as a career."

"Thank you," I said. My voice was quiet, but inside, my heart was singing. There had been so many times this week when I'd felt sure that I had no idea what I was doing, so knowing that Ms. Garcia thought my work was good made me feel wonderful. The most important thing, though, was the fact that I loved both photos. As I thought about that, I realized that when Ms. Garcia had told us we needed to learn to "see in a new way," she'd really just meant we needed the confidence to see for ourselves.

Ms. Garcia moved over to Camila's pictures. "This one turned out so well," she said, looking at a shot of the Great Room at Coventry House.

Camila had really captured the room's elegance, and the buzz of all the people working to restore it. Looking at it made me feel like I was standing right there.

"Is this the same house as the one with the mural?" Ms. Garcia asked. We nodded. As I looked at the photo of the Great Room again, sadness rose in me. Unless something changed soon, I thought, photographs would be the only way anyone would ever be able to see Coventry House.

That night, my parents, Camila, and I arrived at COCA for the exhibit. Sparkly lights were strung over the front entrance to the trees around it, creating a starry, swooping canopy to walk under. Inside, the sculpture class had constructed papier-mâché mobiles that hung from the lobby ceiling, while easels scattered everywhere displayed watercolors and oil paintings done by the advanced art students. Our photographs hung in neat rows on the walls throughout the crowded space.

I spotted Abby and her mom in front of Abby's photos. "Have you seen Abby's masterpiece?" her mom asked, gesturing to the picture of the Clydesdale horses. She gave Abby a hug. "I had no *idea* you were such a talented photographer, honey! I should hire you to take some pet photos for my office."

"Really?" Abby squeaked. She looked at me, eyes dancing. "Lea! You *have* to take photos with me. It'll be so much more fun!"

"Okay," I said, thrilled. "Maybe we could sell prints to raise money for the animal sanctuary in Brazil where they're taking care of the baby sloth!"

Abby clapped her hands together. "Great idea!"

As Abby started making plans, my gaze drifted across the crowd. By the entrance, a woman in a purple velvet dress caught my eye. As she turned her head, I recognized Hallie! I had told her about the COCA exhibit, but I'd never expected her to actually come. Yet here she was, leaning on Justus.

I grabbed Mom's hand and dragged her across the room. Hallie's face lit up when I told her Mom was Ama's daughter.

"It's so wonderful to meet you," she said, clasping Mom's hand.

"Thank you both so much for coming," Mom said to Hallie and Justus. "Are you a fan of photography?" she asked Hallie.

"I'm a fan of Lea," Hallie said, eyes sparkling. "When she told us about the exhibit, I thought, now there's something I'd like to see. And my son is a big fan of COCA."

“I helped raise funds for the restoration a few years ago,” Justus said. “This building is a St. Louis landmark, and those should be preserved.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said my mother.

Suddenly, my brain was about to burst with an idea. “Mr. Dumond, what do you do?” I asked.

He looked surprised. “I’m a commercial real estate developer,” he replied.

“Really?” I said eagerly. “Do you ever fix up old buildings? Because my mom’s trying to save this amazing house in Old North St. Louis and make it into a community center.”

“Lea,” Mom broke in. She seemed embarrassed, but my mind was moving too fast to stop.

“The building she’s fixing up is Coventry House, where you and Ama went to school,” I told Hallie. Then I turned to Justus. “But the funding fell through, so now it may get torn down.”

“Lea, please,” said Mom. “We don’t need to discuss it.”

“Actually, we *should* discuss it,” said Hallie, turning to her son. “Lea’s right. Coventry House is an important piece of this city’s architectural history. It would be a terrible shame to lose it after all these years.”

“I’d like to see the project,” Justus said.

“Really?” Mom said. I could hear the surprise in her voice.

Justus nodded. “I’ve been looking to do a historical renovation. I just haven’t found the right project. This one sounds promising.”

“You two discuss it,” Hallie said, “while Lea shows me her photographs.”

She leaned on me as we walked over to my pictures, but I was the one who was shaking. I really wanted her to like my work. First, I showed her the photo of Camila and Abby at the mural. She looked at it for a long moment, studying the faces.

“I remember this mural,” she said wistfully. “I’m so glad it’s being brought back to life. And your photo is extraordinary.”

“Thank you,” I said. Hallie turned, studying the two portraits of herself on the wall nearby. When she finally looked back at me, her eyes began to tear up.

“Looking at this makes me realize how lucky I’ve been,” she said. “I had so many dreams for adventure as a girl, and fulfilled so many of them. I wish the same thing for you,” she said, and as she smiled, I felt like I was glowing.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur. Mom and Dad both loved my photos. Dad even tried to call Zac in Brazil on video chat to show him the

exhibit, but there was no answer. So we left a crazy rushed message asking him to call us back, and I used Dad's phone to e-mail Zac my photos. Then it seemed like everyone in the room wanted to talk to me about the Hallie photographs—how I'd found the first picture and how I'd gotten the idea for the new portrait. I talked so much that my mouth got dry and Dad had to get me a cup of water.

"You should add 'detective' to your list of accomplishments," he said as he handed it to me.

Justus really liked my portrait of Hallie. He even said he wanted to buy it, but I told him I would make him a copy for free. That made him smile. Right after that, my mom whispered to me that it was "looking good" that Justus would fund the restoration of the Coventry House! I felt like I was floating on air.

Finally, people started to leave. As Justus went to get Hallie's coat, I sat next to her on a leather bench, across from the mosaic of the St. Louis skyline. "Thank you again for coming," I said. Hallie turned to me, the compass necklace swaying around her neck.

"I should thank *you*," she said. "You brought Amanda back into my life, along with so many good memories." I flushed, pleased.

"You remind me so much of your grandmother as a girl, Lea," Hallie said. "Like Amanda, you have a truly adventurous spirit. I want to make sure you never lose that, no matter what life throws at you." With shaking hands, Hallie bent her head and slipped off her compass necklace. "I want you to have this," she said, extending it to me.

"Oh, no," I said, "I can't. It's too special—it's your last link with Ama __"

"That's *why* you should have it!" Hallie exclaimed, and pressed it into my hand. "It's for you to keep forever, so you can remember Ama and me. Your grandmother had total faith that both our lives would be great adventures," she said, "as long as we weren't afraid to go after what we wanted. Now, that spirit of adventure lives on in you."

Hallie hung the compass around my neck. I was almost crying, but at the same time, my heart felt like it was flying. As I hugged Hallie, feeling Ama's compass connecting us, I remembered the promise Hallie and Ama had made to each other, to follow their dreams. I was part of that now, too, and I knew it was one promise I would always keep.

A Return to Brazil

Chapter 14

The morning Camila was going to fly home, I helped her pack. We squashed her clothes and the St. Louis Cardinals foam finger inside her suitcase, and I sat on top so she could zip it shut. By the time we rolled the suitcase out of Zac's room and carried it downstairs, we had just enough time for a quick snack. My mom gave us glasses of milk and some leftover squares of gooey butter cake to eat on the porch.

Outside, the weather was perfect. Daffodils and crocuses were in bloom along the footpath leading from our porch to the Hickory Street sidewalk, and the air smelled like flowers and wet grass. "I will miss St. Louis," Camila said, as we sat on the front steps. "The buildings and the gardens…"

"Not to mention the gooey butter cake," I said, taking a bite. She laughed. "Especially the gooey butter cake!" she said. Then she looked serious. "Most of all, I will miss you, Lea."

"I'll miss you too!" I said. "And I want to say thank you," I added. "You and Abby helped me find Hallie."

Camila looked pleased. "It was a great adventure," she said. Suddenly, she jumped up. "I almost forgot!" She raced inside and came back a minute later with a small plastic tube. "I got you a gift," she said, handing it to me.

"Really?" I said, pleased. I took the blue cap off the end of the tube and held it up, and a rolled-up paper slipped out. Carefully, I uncurled it to reveal a colorful, antique-looking map of St. Louis. The writing was spidery and old-fashioned, but I could still read the markings for Lafayette Square, Old North St. Louis, Forest Park, and the Jewel Box. "This is so cool!" I exclaimed.

"It is from the History Museum," Camila said. "Now you have a map of

St. Louis for your room. To remind you to keep exploring even when you are at home."

Mom and I drove Camila to the airport and waited while she boarded the plane to Chicago. As she moved down the walkway out of sight, sadness crept up on me. I had no idea if I'd ever see Camila or Brazil again. *Someday*, I thought to myself, *I'm going to return to Brazil.* But when? It seemed impossible that I'd ever get a chance to go back there. Still, I thought about running on the golden beaches and trekking through dense rainforest with howler monkeys and sloths during the entire ride back to Lafayette Square.

Mom's cell phone rang as we were walking up to our house. She picked up.

"Hello, Mr. Dumond," she said, her voice catching with excitement. "You did?…Really? That's wonderful. I'll have my office call yours to set up a meeting on Monday." Mom hung up the phone and turned to me, her eyes shining.

"It's official. Justus Dumond is going to fund the Coventry House project!" she exclaimed, a grin bursting onto her face. "We don't have to worry about it being torn down!"

I yelped with excitement and hugged her. "You did it!"

"Actually, Lea, I think *you* did it," Mom said, giving me a squeeze. "Thank you for having the courage to mention the project to him. Now Coventry House will be part of both St. Louis's past *and* its future. You've helped to protect an important piece of the city's history."

Mom's words made me glow inside. As I hugged her again, I thought about all the people in the community who would get a chance to spend time at Coventry House now. I felt really proud that I'd done something to help make that possible.

While Mom called her partners to let them know the good news, I checked my e-mail. My heart did a happy skip when I saw a new message from Zac:

> Your photos are awesome. Seriously, you are an amazing photographer! And I can't believe how you tracked down Hallie. You really proved that you're Ama's granddaughter!

Zac had attached a few photos of the baby macaws, who now had a lot more feathers. As I read the rest of his e-mail, however, I could tell that the

situation there wasn’t great.

> The poachers here have gotten more active. They tried cutting the wire fence around the sanctuary. And they even stole Wylie, our golden tamarin monkey with the broken arm. It’s bad enough that they’re hunting healthy animals, but stealing an injured monkey? That’s truly evil.

As I read, anger rose inside me.

> They’ve been growing bolder, but I’ve been growing bolder, too. I’ve researched their tracking patterns and how they keep and smuggle the animals they’re taking. The next time they come after our animals, I’ll be ready.

My stomach twisted around itself in anxiety. What Zac was doing sounded dangerous. I kept reading.

> I know the risks and I’m prepared. Someone needs to protect these animals. Don’t worry about me, Lea, I know what I’m doing—it’s only the most important work I’ve ever done.
>
> Hugs, Z.

I stared at the computer screen for a long moment after I finished reading. I was worried about Zac, but I knew he was right. It *was* up to all of us to save and protect the things we cared about—just the way I had saved Amanda the baby sloth, and Abby had saved Dodger, and Mom was saving Coventry House. In a way I wished I could be back in the rainforest with Zac. It sounded dangerous and truly scary, but I agreed with him: Saving wild animals from evil poachers seemed like the most important work anyone could do.

About the Author

Lisa Yee has written over a dozen books for young people. She loves to research and was thrilled when Lea's stories took her to the Bahia coast of Brazil. There, she snorkeled among the coral reefs, sampled local foods, and learned about the traditions and customs of the region. Lisa also visited the Amazon rainforest, where she fished for piranha, swam in the Amazon River, and even ate roasted larvae during a hike through the rainforest. However, the highlights of her travels were meeting an alligator, a boa constrictor, and a baby sloth—though not all at once!

You can learn more about Lisa at www.lisayee.com and see photos of her Brazilian adventures.

About the Author

Kellen Hertz was born in Canada and raised in California's Central Valley. She started her first novel at twelve, which was tragically left unfinished after the first chapter became lost in a sea of library books on the floor of her room. She overcame her sorrow by reading and writing a lot, and then went to Yale and UCLA and read and wrote some more. She's written plays and screenplays, directed a movie, and written or produced over 80 hours of prime-time and cable television. She loves flea markets, old maps, coffee, words and all the flavors they come in, and most of all, her family. She lives with her husband and son in Los Angeles.

Glossary of Portuguese Words

NOTE: In the pronunciation guide below, you'll sometimes see a small *m* or *n* at the end of a syllable. In these places, pronounce the letter very gently or don't quite finish saying it. In Brazil, an *l* at the end of a word is often pronounced "oo."

açaí *(ah-sah-EE)*—a small, dark-purple fruit harvested from the açaí palm tree, which is native to Brazil

água de coco *(AH-gwah juh CO-co)*—coconut water

amanhã *(ah-mahn-YAH^{n})*—tomorrow

Amazonas *(ah-mah-ZOH-nahss)*—Amazon

amiga *(ah-MEE-guh)*—female friend

Amigos do Oceano Santuário das Tartarugas Marinhas *(ah-MEE-gooss doo o-say-AH-noo sahn-too-AH-ree-oo dass tar-tuh-ROO-gahss mah-REE^{n}-yahss)*—Friends of the Ocean Sea Turtle Sanctuary

Bahia *(bah-EE-uh)*—one of Brazil's twenty-six states, located on the eastern side of the country on the Atlantic coast; the birthplace of Brazil

Baianas *(bah-ee-AH-nahss)*—women of Bahia who dress in white to honor the Afro Brazilian religion of Candomblé

bem-vinda *(beh^{m} VEE^{n}-dah)*—welcome (spoken to females)

bom dia *(boh^{m} JEE-ah)*—good morning

Bom trabalho. *(boh^{m} trah-BAHL-yo)*—Good job.

boto *(BOH-toh)*—a pink freshwater dolphin

Brasil *(brah-ZEE-oo)*—Brazil

Brilha, brilha, estrelinha… *(BREEL-yah BREEL-yah ehs-tray-LEEN-yah)*—Twinkle, twinkle, little star

capoeira *(kah-po-AY-ruh)*—a Brazilian martial art that combines dance, acrobatics, and music

carambola *(cah-rahm-BOH-lah)*—a tropical fruit shaped like a star

castelo de areia *(kah-STEH-loo juh uh-REE-yuh)*—sand castle

Claro que sim. *(KLAH-roo keh SEE^{m})*—Yes, of course.

cocadas *(ko-KAH-duhss)*—Brazilian coconut candy

coxinha *(KO-shee^{n}-yuh)*—a fried, drumstick-shaped Brazilian snack stuffed with a creamy chicken filling

de nada *(juh NAH-dah)*—you're welcome

Está aí? *(ess-TAH ah-EE)*—Are you there?

Esta é a minha irmã. *(EHSS-tah eh ah MEE^{n}-yuh eer-MAH^{n})*—This is my sister.

Estes são meus amigos. *(EHSS-tehss saoo MEH-ooz uh-MEE-gooss)*—These are my friends.

família *(fah-MEE-lee-uh)*—family

Galo Louco *(GAH-loh LOH-oo-coh)*—crazy rooster

irmã *(eer-MAH^{n})*—sister

irmão *(eer-MAHW)*—brother

macaco *(mah-CAH-coo)*—monkey

mãe *(maee)*—mother

manjar branco *(mah-JAH-huh BRAHN-koo)*—Brazilian coconut pudding

meu *(MAY-oo)*—my or mine

meu nome é *(MEH-oo NO-may EH)*—my name is

Minha irmã é minha heroína. *(MEE^{n}-yuh eer-MAH^{n} eh MEE^{n}-yuh ay-ro-EE-nuh)*—My sister is my heroine.

Moda Praia *(MO-duh PRAH-yuh)*—beach fashion

moqueca *(mo-KEH-kuh)*—a Brazilian seafood stew made with coconut milk, red palm oil, tomato, onions, garlic, and coriander

muito prazer *(moo-EE-too prah-ZEHR)*—much pleasure; an expression used when you first meet someone

Não estou aqui. *(NAH-oo ess-TOH ah-KEE)*—I'm not here.

O que? *(oh KAY)*—What?

obrigada *(o-bree-GAH-duh)*—thank you (spoken by females)

obrigado *(o-bree-GAH-doo)*—thank you (spoken by males)

oi *(oy)*—hi

olá *(o-LAH)*—hello

Olha! *(OHL-yah)*—Look!

Onde você está? *(OH^{n}-day voh-SAY ess-TAH)*—Where are you?

orixá *(o-ree-SHAH)*—a god or spirit from African religious traditions recognized in Brazil

pão de queijo *(pahw deh KAY-ho)*—cheesy bread rolls

pão francês *(pahw frahn-SAYSS)*—French bread

pare *(PAH-ray)*—stop

por favor *(por fah-VOR)*—please

Por que você está chorando? *(pohr kay voh-SAY ess-TAH sho-RAH^{n}-doh)*—Why are you crying?

pastel de forno *(pah-STEHL juh FOR-noo)*—savory hand pie with a flaky crust stuffed with various fillings such as cheese or meat

Pelourinho *(peh-lo-oo-REE^{n}-yoo)*—the historic district of Salvador, Bahia

praia *(PRAH-yuh)*—beach

real *(ray-AHL)*—unit of Brazilian currency

saboroso *(sah-boh-ROH-soh)*—very tasty

saltenha *(sahl-TEHN-yuh)*—savory pastry with sweet and spicy meat filling

Salvador *(sahl-vuh-DOR)*—the capital city of Bahia

Senhor do Bonfim *(seh^{n}-YOR doo BOH^{n}-fee^{m})*—the savior of Bahia who guards the city, grants wishes, and provides miracles

Senhora *(seh^{n}-YO-ruh)*—Mrs.

um, dois, três *(oo^{m} doyss trayss)*—one, two, three

vem *(veh^{m})*—come

Você está visitando? *(vo-SEH eh-STAH vee-see-TAH^{n}-doo)*—Are you visiting?

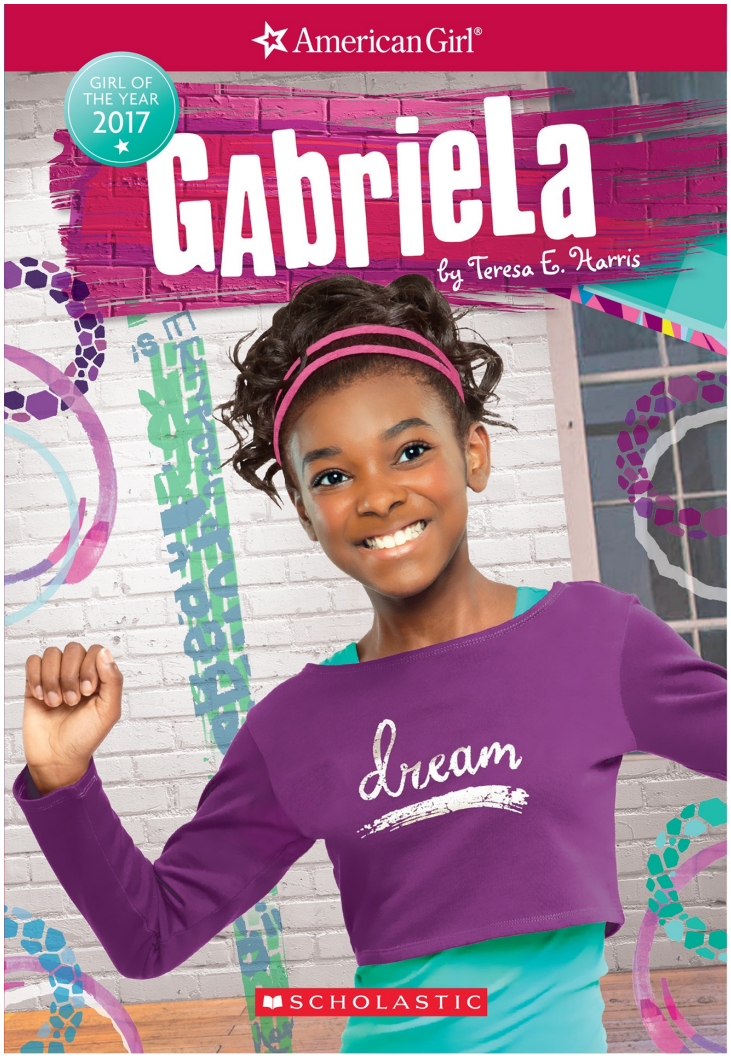
Yemanjá *(yeh-mah^{n}-ZHAH)*—One of the orixás from African religious traditions, Bahia's Queen of the Ocean is honored with a festival on February 2

Meet the 2017 Girl of the Year, Gabriela McBride!

She’s a true talent who gets creative for a cause.

Can Gabby use the power of her poetry to save her beloved community arts center from shutting down?

Turn the page to read a preview of Gabriela's first book!



Like a Roller Coaster

Chapter 1

Toe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-STOMP.

Toe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-STOMP.

Each move burst into my head like a shout. All around me the air was filled with the sounds of tap shoes scraping and stomping, Mama calling out the next step as she snapped in time to the rhythm of the music. Above me, the sun poured through Liberty's stained-glass windows, leaving little pools of colored light on the floor at my feet.

Riff-heel-ball change-riff-heel-stomp.

Riff-heel-ball change-riff-heal-tuuuuuuurrn.

I stood on my right leg and whirled around, careful to find my spot so I wouldn't get dizzy. My spot was always the same in dance studio number seven: The hollowed-out square cut into the wall right between the two big mirrors. A phone niche, Mama called it, from the time when phones were so big people had to literally carve out space for them.

Toe-heel-toe-heel-toe-heel-chug.

Toe-heel-scuff-heel-tip-heel-SLAM!

My feet flew over the dance studio's worn wooden floor, from one puddle of light to another, and soon my heart was pounding out a rhythm in time with the beat, like the music and I had become one. I couldn't help it. I closed my eyes. I knew what Mama would say if she caught me: "Gabriela McBride, you know how unsafe that is? And you can lose your place that way!"

I did know that, but I knew Liberty better. Knew every spot on its dance floors, scuffed white from years of dancers like me stomping, turning, and tapping. And I knew that when I opened my eyes, a few beats from now, I'd

see Liberty's painted-over brick walls, exposed heating pipes, and its tin-tiled ceiling. And I'd have no trouble finding my place.

"And … finish," Mama said as she turned the volume down on the old sound system we used during tap rehearsal. The music faded and then disappeared. I opened my eyes just as Mama began to clap.

"If I didn't know any better," said Mama, "I would think I was in the presence of Savion Glover's dancers." Mama beamed at each member of the Liberty Junior Dance Company in turn. When her eyes met mine, she winked. I winked back.

Mama, or Miss Tina as all the other students called her, was the founder and executive director of Liberty, also known as Liberty Arts Center, a community center she'd started seventeen years ago. Not only was Mama the "Big Kahuna" (that's what Daddy called her), she was also the director of dance programs, which suited her just fine. Mama, with her strong, powerful legs and fluid movements, always said dancing came naturally to her, like breathing. And then she'd say, "It's like that for you, too, Gabby."

It was true. Dancing came to me as easily as coding came to my best friend, Teagan, or the way words came to my cousin, Red. Or the way words seemed to come to almost everyone else, except me.

I glanced up at the clock as Mama instructed us to take a seat on the floor. My heart was still racing, and as the clock crept closer to six, my pulse sped up. I had somewhere important to be.

"Excellent work today, ladies! You're almost ready for our Rhythm and Views show next month."

Five fifty-five. I stared at Mama, willing her eyes to meet mine. When at last she looked over at me, I looked at the clock and back at her. She nodded. She hadn't forgotten she'd given me permission to skip ballet rehearsal and go to the poetry group meeting instead. I half listened as Mama rattled off dates, expectations, and information about costumes.

"Remember how much Rhythm and Views means to Liberty and to the wider community," Mama said. "Sixteen years this show has gone on, and people always come up to me and say—"

I finished Mama's sentence in my head: that they look forward to this day all year. The Liberty community loved the show because we got to celebrate all the hard work we'd done in the last year. Art students got to exhibit their work in the lobby and guests could even purchase the artwork, just like at a real art gallery. The dance companies performed the pieces we'd been perfecting all year. An empanada take-out joint from across the street catered the snack bar, and everyone's friends and family came out for the show. It was like a block party, cookout, and concert all rolled into one, and it was my

favorite day, too.

Mama finished her speech and then clapped loudly again, her way of signaling that it was time to go.

I jumped to my feet, ran over to where I'd left my bag, and tore off my tap shoes. In four seconds flat, I was bolting toward the door in my sneakers, pausing just long enough to wave to Mama. She smiled and shook her head. I guess she was as surprised as I still sometimes was that I was in a hurry to get to a place where I'd have to stand up and talk in front of other people.

See, talking wasn't like dancing for me. When I danced tap or hip-hop, I could speak with my feet. My hands. My whole body, if I wanted to. I could make one move quiet as a whisper, the next loud as a shout. But sometimes, when I opened my mouth, it was like my words started to second-guess themselves. Like they weren't sure if they wanted to come out and when they finally did, I started stuttering like crazy.

But not all the time.

Like when I was racing to the dance studio where the poetry group met, I ran straight into Amelia Sanchez, my ballet instructor. "Whoa, Gabby, slow down," she said, laughing. "I spoke to your mom. You're going to make up tonight's missed rehearsal, right?"

"I definitely am," I said, without a single stutter.

I kept on going. And when I ran into good old Stan, the friendliest janitor ever, he said, "Where are you hurrying off to, Gabby?" and I replied, "Poetry club meeting. See you later!" without missing a beat.

Mrs. Baxter, my speech therapist at school, told me that people who stutter don't do it as much in places they feel comfortable. That's why my speech was hardly ever bumpy when I was in our little white-and-blue house on Tompkins Street with Mama and Daddy or at Liberty, because both places were home to me, both places filled with family. Like Amelia, who I'd known since she was nineteen and I was six. She taught me how to spot on my turns by challenging me to a staring contest. "Every time you turn, I want us eye-to-eye." Even now, four years later, if Amelia thought I wasn't spotting she'd gently say, "Staring contest, Gabby," to remind me. Stan was like family, too. I'd known him my whole life—he'd been the janitor at Liberty ever since Mama opened it.

"Hold on there now," Stan called out, and I stopped in my tracks. "Poetry's been moved to the auditorium, hasn't it?"

Shoot! How had I forgotten? I took off in the other direction, calling, "Thanks, Stan," over my shoulder as I went.

By the time I made it to the auditorium, the whole group was already up onstage. For the second time, I stopped in my tracks. I'd danced on that very

same stage plenty of times, but today was the very first time I'd have to speak on it. I gulped.

"Gabby, over here!"

Teagan called to me with a frantic wave of her hand. The poetry group had made a circle onstage in front of the heavy red curtain, and Teagan had saved me a seat right beside her.

"I've got everything ready to go," she whispered to me, reaching up to adjust her beanie over her strawberry-blonde hair. There were two things Teagan was almost never without: her coding notebook (she'd named it Cody) and her turquoise beanie.

"Got what ready to go?" I asked.

"The you-know-what that we've been working on?" Teagan wriggled her eyebrows. "You know, the surprise?"

"Oh, right!" I wiped my sweaty hands on my leggings.

"Are you okay, Gabby?"

"Y-Yes," I stammered. But Teagan knew me better than almost anyone.

"You're nervous about saying your poem in front of Bria and Alejandro, right?" Teagan sat up on her knees and faced me. She was in full-on Teagan Problem-Solving Mode. "Just relax and remember to think about each word before you say it. Give it time to form in your mind. Don't rush. Okay?"

I nodded again. "Okay."

Just then, my cousin Red emerged from behind the curtain, rubbing his hands together and smiling big enough to show off the right front tooth he'd chipped last summer when he hit a curb and flew over the handlebars of his bike. "All right, poets," he said. "Tonight we say bye-bye to that old dance studio and hello to the stage. We're big-time now, ready for crowds skyscraper-high touching clouds."

Red had been staying with my family for the past four months, ever since his mom, Mama's sister and a military doctor, had gotten called back to active duty. At first, I didn't like Red being around too much—for the first few weeks after he arrived, I called him the Interloper until Mama and Daddy told me to stop. But it wasn't my fault Red was always in the upstairs bathroom exactly when I needed to use it. Plus, he was loud, like two-trains-crashing-into-each-other loud, and he never missed a chance to remind me that he was going into seventh grade and I was only going into sixth.

But, I had to admit Red had a way with words. He could spin a line of poetry like I could pas de bourrée. He lived and breathed poetry, and wanted to bring it to Liberty in the form of a club—nothing too formal. Mama was 100 percent behind the idea and, because I was supposed to be showing Red

he was welcome and not an interloper, Mama said, “Gabby, you should join, too.” She’d made it sound like a suggestion, but it was really an order.

I hadn’t wanted to join at first—spoken words are your enemy when you stutter—but words just seemed to flow whenever the poetry group got together. Even mine—most of the time.

“So, the Rhythm and Views show is our first chance to show everyone what we’ve got,” Red was saying.

I imagined Teagan’s grandfather, who was the visual arts instructor and the unofficial program director, preparing his art students, too. Everyone—dancers, artists, and this year, poets, too—was a part of Rhythm and Views, and everyone needed to be ready.

“And we need to show them that we’ve got mad talent,” Red was saying. “Which is why everything’s got to be perfect. Our poems, the order, everything. Alejandro, can you handle the spotlight for me?”

“On it,” Alejandro replied. He was tall and pencil-skinny with thick black hair that came to the middle of his back. Red sometimes liked to joke that Alejandro’s hair weighed more than he did. As Alejandro rose and climbed up to the lighting booth, Red pulled a list from the front pocket of his shorts. On it was a list of names. The order of performances. I was first.

First!

“Ready, Gabby?” Red asked. “You can do it. You’re big-time now.”

“Ready for crowds,” a girl named Bria chimed in.

“Skyscraper-high,” shouted Alejandro, coming out from the booth at the back of the theater.

“T-Touching clouds,” I finished quietly.

“Yes!” Red cried, clapping loudly. Soon everyone else joined in.

As I got to my feet, the applause died down.

“Take center stage, Gabby,” Red said, pointing.

I moved to the middle of the circle and looked out at the sea of chairs. The spotlight shined directly on me. Big-time now, ready for crowds.

“Ssssssspeaking ough-ought to be—” I began, and then I stopped. My face grew hot. I hated stuttering in front of my friends. Maybe I could tell Red to come back to me at the end.

“You were doing great, Gabby,” Alejandro called out.

“Keep going,” said Red.

“Slow down and think about each word,” Teagan put in.

Mama and Daddy were always telling me that while it was good to work with Mrs. Baxter, I shouldn’t let my bumpy speech stop me from talking. “We

love you no matter how many sounds you make," they'd say. "Say what you have to say! We're always listening."

"Okay." Another deep breath. Then I started over.

"Speaking ought to be, ought to be like … like breathing

Words always there, no need for … reaching

Like cracking a jjjjjjoke is for a joker

But for me it's like a roller coaster … coaster"

I paused. I knew this poem and even bigger than that, I knew these people. Red. Teagan. Alejandro. Bria. I knew this space, too, Liberty's auditorium. I knew there were 480 seats, but only 476 worked. I knew seat 3L was the best in the house, that one of the angels carved into the balcony was cross-eyed, and that there was a corner where every word you said echoed throughout the auditorium, even if you whispered. You're home, Gabby, I told myself, and picked up my poem where I left off.

"Up, up, up and then racing … racing to the g-ground

Words flying by me that I can't pin down

Words soar past me, whip my face like … like air

In my mind, in my heart, everywhere

I … I ch-chase those wwwwords down

But when I try to speak, I don't make a sound

Up, up, up and then racing to the ground

Words flying by me that I can't pin down

Sometimes my words get caught

Come grinding to a halt

I slip, I fall, I stutter

But it's not my fault

Up, up, up and then racing to the ground

Words flying by me that I can't pin down."

The applause was instantaneous. So was my smile. I'd made it through my whole poem, and by the end I wasn't stuttering at all! I took a deep, exaggerated bow. And then another, and then curtsied until the rest of the poetry group was either laughing or calling out, "Brava, brava!" or "Encore, encore!"

Red, still beaming, held up his hand for silence. "No time for encores, but awesome job, Gabby." He walked over and gave me a high five. "Bria, you're up."

Bria, a tall, round-faced girl with a big, bushy ponytail, took center stage as I slid back into my place next to Teagan. Bria, like Alejandro and Red, was

going into seventh grade and when Red had told her about the poetry group, she'd joined immediately.

"Nice job," Teagan mouthed. Then she reached into the pocket of her jeans and pulled out a flash drive. "Ready for later?" she whispered.

I nodded. I felt ready for anything.

The rest of the performances flew by, and I still couldn't believe how far we'd all come since Red had first started the poetry club. And even more than that, I couldn't wait for the show. Poetry, dancing, and—

"Gabby and I have a surprise," Teagan announced, just as Alejandro, the final poet, took his seat. "We've been working on something for the show, a little something visual to go with our poetry. Wait right here."

Teagan jumped to her feet, pulling me with her. We darted around the curtain and backstage, where there was a laptop sitting on top of a podium. Wires snaked down the side of the podium like vines. To anyone else all of those wires would have been intimidating. But not to Teagan. In one smooth motion, she plugged the projector adapter into the laptop, inserted her flash drive, and said, "Can you get the main power switch for the podium and projector?" She pointed at a black box hanging on the wall behind us. It looked like a very large, very expensive version of the circuit breaker in our garage, only, I realized after pulling the box open, much more complicated. Inside were three rows of buttons and switches, all glowing a faint shade of neon green.

"Um, Teagan?"

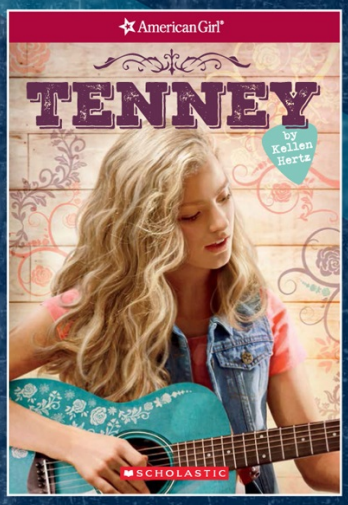
"On it," Teagan replied, and hurried over. She pointed at a big silver button on top of all the others. "This one turns on the main power for all the stage equipment. It's kind of cool how it all works. You see, this main box controls—"

"Teagan," I cut in. Sometimes, when Teagan started talking tech, she couldn't stop.

"Sorry!" Teagan said, laughing. "Ready?"

I nodded. We reached for the button, both of our fingers pushing it at the same time.

And everything went black.



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